

Faith in Humanity

By: karrafeare

AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his own safety. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to take the genin test. Finished! Lookout for Sequel Restoration of Faith!

Status: complete

Published: 2004-02-09

Updated: 2007-03-02

Words: 195434

Chapters: 23

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure - Reviews: 1,116 - Favs: 1,556 - Follows: 600

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/1724655/1/Faith-in-Humanity>

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Faith in Humanity

[Introduction](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Original Jutsus](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Author's note](#)

Prologue

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Narito survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test.

Warning: Naruto OOC. No pairings as of yet – don't know if I'll have any. PG-13. Somewhat dark version of Naruto, very cynical and cold. This prologue is VERY DARK! Not for the faint hearted. No blood and gore but a lot of psychological attack, suicide, murder.

...means "thoughts"

===== means "Change of Scene"

Prologue

Naruto gazed avidly through the window at the children playing happily in the park across his home. Home, that's what he called it. It was a small and empty apartment. What did you expect when the only inhabitant was a six-year-old boy with messy blonde hair and sad blue eyes that almost reflected his soul's emptiness.

I just don't understand. Why do they hate me so? What did I do wrong?

He had asked himself that question for a very VERY long time. Ever since he could remember, he had tried everything to befriend those around him, trying to find at least one person willing to be with him, even if it was only for a short amount of time. All attempts have failed. If he walked towards a group of kids, they would either walk away or be dragged away by their parents. If he waited in the

playground for them to return, they would come, see him there on the swing and leave once again. He even tried to walk from house to house to introduce himself. All that ever brought him was angry glares that he knew he didn't deserve or cold contempt and asked icily to leave the premises and never come back.

The child of six sighed again, trying to will away the tears and to ignore the giant black hole that was currently consuming his heart.

Even my nanny couldn't stand me.

The child thought about his previous guardian. A young lady of 20 or so, she looked after him for the past 3 years. That is, if "looking after" was the word that described her actions. She rarely came to visit him, if only on the weekends to see if he was still alive. Brought lots of instant ramen and other groceries for him, then left him to his own boiling of water and cooking of meals. He had learnt from an early age that he had no one to depend on, only himself. So even at the young age of 4 or 5, she had already taught him how to go to the Laundromats for washing clothes, how to clean up the house and how to sew ripped clothes. She didn't exactly *teach* him much though, only ordering him around and showing him the basics. He sort of missed her. For a better part of 3 years, she was his only companion. Though she always ignored his attempts at conversation and stayed at least a meter away from his physical presence. And then, a few months before, she had quit her position and left Konoha without telling him or even the Hokage.

Now, he lived alone, completely alone.

A soft knock on his door startled the young boy. No one had ever visited him in his apartment before, even his previous nanny had just barged in, so he was unaccustomed to the sound. A second knock made him realize he wasn't dreaming and he ran towards the doorway and slid the doors open. Outside his door revealed the third Hokage and another woman he had never seen before.

Naruto, happy that he had actually gotten guests in his house, silently ushered both of them in and tried to make them comfortable, sitting on his old and ragged couch.

The third Hokage smiled gently at Naruto, though a gleam of sadness was clearly reflected from his old and wise eyes. Still so innocent and pure. How much longer can this child stand the loneliness? The Hokage broke off his musings with a slight shake of his head and went straight to the point.

"Naruto." Naruto looked up at the Hokage.

"This," indicating the woman sitting next to him, "is Mrs. Tanuki. She is your new guardian and baby sitter."

Naruto smiled brilliantly at that statement. Finally, someone who would stay with me and look after me!! He then turned towards the kindly looking old lady. She had curly white hair all bundled on top of her head and was wearing a traditional kimono. She smiled and nodded towards him and he nodded back in silent greeting.

After a few more minutes of discussion, the Hokage left, leaving Naruto and his new caretaker still sitting in the lounge. Naruto shifted nervously on his seat. This was his only chance at gaining a friend, maybe even a family member. He had to be on his very best behavior.

Mrs. Tanuki smiled at him again and said in the gentlest tone possible: "It's getting late, maybe you should take a nap, Naruto." Naruto smiled at the old lady again, nodded and went silently to take said nap. If he had turned around at that moment, he would have seen the gentle smile on the old lady's face disappear to form an ugly sneer.

That night, Naruto had another nightmare. He dreamt of those same villagers that hated him, despised him, wanting to kill him. He could

feel their angry fingers closed around his throat, choking him, stealing away his oxygen.

I CAN'T BREATHE!!!He realized.

It's just a dream! It's just a dream! It'sjustadream!! It'sjustadream!! It'sjustadream!!He mentally repeated that phrase to himself.

I STILL CAN'T BREATHE!!!Naruto panicked.

I've got to wake up! WAKE UP!

Naruto forced his eyes wide open, quickly adjusting to the dark of the night and saw something that will haunt him for the rest of his life.

He wasn't just dreaming about being choked to death. He was being choked to death. And by none other than the nice old lady sitter that he had just met that afternoon. Though she no longer looked *nice* at all. Mrs. Tanuki's hair was out of its usual bun, and it framed wildly around her, making her look like a mad witch. Her eyes too, were wide but with a small pupil, enlarging the area of her green irises, making her look even more insane. Her breath was shallow and harsh as if she was taking away his breathing. Her lips curled into a nasty and cruel sneer and she watched the young Naruto turn even paler and desperately gasping for air.

Naruto's panicked mind realized another assessment. Mrs. Tanuki is trying to kill me! I.. I.. I don't wanna die! I don't wanna die!!He started struggling to get out of her grip. She tightened her hands around his throat, leaving a very painful and visible mark there.

Suddenly, a violent rage erupted through out Naruto's body.

I WILL NOT DIE BY SUCH A DEVIOUS HANDS!!!

Naruto felt a sudden lurch of strength and energy. He kicked Mrs. Tanuki away, forcing her to release his bruised throat. She toppled

backward by his powerful kick, knocking against the walls and slid down to the floor. A small trickle of blood rained down her forehead.

While she was down for the moment, Naruto took in full gulps of sweet air. He pressed his hands on his bruised throat and can feel the juncture where she had strangled him. After catching some of his breath, he asked her, wincing at the harsh and raw tone of voice due to his sore throat. "Why?"

Mrs. Tanuki slowly sat up from her position on the ground. She raised her head to meet him in the eye. Naruto gasped at the raw anger and raging hatred being openly displayed in her eyes. She opened her bleeding lips and sent an icy remark back at him. "Because you killed my husband and my sons."

Confused and frightened, Naruto huddled into himself more. After all, he was only 6 years old, what could he have done to hurt Mrs. Tanuki's husband and sons. It didn't make any sense to him at all.

As if sensing his confusion, Mrs. Tanuki gave him a cruel smirk and told him the secret of his birth. "You are the creature known as the **Nine Tails Demon Fox** . The destroyer of thousands of lives and very nearly destroyed Konohagakure 6 years ago. That (She spat in hatred) **beast** killed my husband and all four of my sons!! THAT **MONSTER** slaughtered all of them!! And **IT** is sealed inside **YOU** !! **YOU ARE THAT KYUUBI NO YOKAI!!** "

Naruto shuddered even more, shaking violently, trying to deny her accusation and yet knowing, deep down inside of him, that the villagers all had to have a reason to hate him. They all must have a reason for neglecting him, hating him, wishing for his death. And now, he knew the truth.

"You are a burden on everyone here."

Naruto started to shake his head in denial.

"It would be better if you're dead."

Now knowing the truth, Naruto was not sure if that wasn't the correct solution after all. He would no longer need to hurt anymore.

"You've been lied to all your life."

Heart rate increasing rapidly, breath coming in short, shallow gasps.

"You killed so many people, and ruined so many lives."

Shuddering violently, whether in denial or fear or shock, Naruto didn't know anymore. And in a way, he didn't care, he just wanted it to stop.

"You are a creature that doesn't... no, **SHOULDN'T** exist."

Is she right? Should I just die? Do I not deserve to exist? Does no one care?

"No one will ever accept you for what you are. YOU MONSTER!!! DEMON!! HELL SPAWN!!!"

Naruto shut his eyes tightly, feeling Mrs. Tanuki's old, bony hands clutch around his sore throat again. This time, it would end. This time, he wouldn't stop her, no matter what.

To Naruto, it was an eternity. He felt his life literary being squeezed out of him. His lungs burned for fresh air, any fresh air, and yet his hands hung lose by his side. It would all be over soon anyway. Darkness crept into the corners of his eyes, he wasn't even sure if he still had them opened anymore. He felt his heart falter over several beats as it started slowing down due to not having enough air to keep it beating. Only a little while more, and he would no longer need to hurt. Naruto lost consciousness.

Pain.

That was all he felt.

Is hell supposed to be so dark? I don't think heaven would let a monster such as myself go in, would it? What is this place?

Slowly but surely, conscious thought returned to him. And for a moment, he was bombarded by sensory overload. His eyes hurt. His throat hurt. His ears were ringing. Every time he breathes in, it hurts.

Wait! Breathe! I'm breathing?!

Indeed, Naruto realized he was still breathing, though each haggard breath was causing more pain than relief. That was when he noticed a sound. The sound was soft and muffled, as if far away. But when Naruto concentrated on it, he realized it was someone calling him, someone close.

"Don't die! Don't die! Breathe! Breathe, Naruto!"

Who could possibly want me alive? Who would care?..

After a while of listening to the voice he didn't recognize continue, asking him not to give up hope, not to let go and die. Naruto was really curious as to who his would be savior was. After all, if he was still alive, that basically meant that someone had saved him, right? Painfully slow, Naruto forced open one of his eyelids.

He saw.. he saw a boy of around 16, above him. The boy was the one who was currently encouraging him to breathe smoothly, while he underwent the resuscitation techniques on Naruto. The boy realized Naruto had opened an eye and was looking at him. He smiled in relief; glad his young charge had made it.

Who are you?Naruto thought.

Though he didn't want to, Naruto fell into unconsciousness again. Too tired to stay awake any longer, Naruto fell limp in the arms of his mysterious savior.

Three days later, Naruto finally woke up from his semi-conscious coma. It seemed his mind was completely closed off from the outside world after the shocking revelations disclosed by Mrs. Tanuki and Naruto needed a lot of time to recover. Physically, the marks on his neck were completely gone. But psychologically, even the doctors didn't even know if Naruto would ever recover from this episode. It may haunt him forever in nightmares and or other psychological inhibitions.

Naruto woke to an unfamiliar ceiling, and after a while, decided to sit up. Even though he was in unfamiliar territory, even a six year old can recognize a hospital room. He sat silently with a blank expression on his face. Suddenly, the door to his room opened and in came the third Hokage, the boy whom saved his life, another tall man with long white hair tied in a pony tail and someone who looked like a doctor.

Naruto stared silently at them each, studying one intently before moving to the others. The doctor came around to check up on his status and recording the results on a chart. Naruto waited for someone to speak. And he waited more.

The third Hokage coughed to get Naruto's attention. "I'm very sorry about Mrs. Tanuki, Naruto. I should never have set her up as your baby sitter without a complete background check on her life and see if she is any threat to you. I sincerely apologise for this tragic event on your life, it is my fault that you had almost died." He bowed low.

Naruto looked blankly back at him. By the end of Hokage's speech, the doctor had finished his analysis. "You seem fine, young man. None of the finger marks on your throat are visible, your lungs are fine, voice cords are fine, and there doesn't seem to be any brain damage either. You're a lucky kid." The doctor chuckled in the silent room, causing him to shift nervously afterward at the tense atmosphere. "Ah! I guess I should go check on the other patients. If you feel any pain at all, young man, just call for me." With that final remark, the doctor left the room in a slight hurry.

Naruto stretched the silence out even longer, before he finally decided upon what he should say next. "Did you send her?"

The third Hokage blinked in shock. "NO! Naruto! I would never!!" Taking a few steps towards Naruto, the third stopped immediately when he saw Naruto wince and moved away from him. He's afraid of me! Oh god, what have I done..Sighing in sadness, the third Hokage looked up to Naruto again with pleading eyes. "Believe me, Naruto. I would never send an assassin against you. NEVER! Yes, I admit it was my fault for not checking out her background completely, but I was just so happy that I had found someone to look after you that I wanted to get the processing underway as soon as possible. I would never have thought that she would turn out the way she did."

The third Hokage winced again as his wording. He had just revealed to Naruto that no one was willing to take care of him, that's why he was desperate enough to employ Mrs. Tanuki in the first place. He watched as Naruto shiver quietly to himself, feeling more and more guilt pile up on his shoulders.

"Naruto." The third Hokage said as gently as he could. "I would not hurt you. Ever."

"How can I trust you? How can I trust anyone?"

Once again shocked at those quietly whispered words, the third Hokage realized that Naruto was having problems with whom he could trust, with whom he could confide in without the threat of death hanging over his head. There was only one solution to this, to tell him the truth.

"Naruto, I would never hurt you! Because I owe your father a depth of gratitude even beyond his grave." Naruto looked up at him sharply, he had never heard of anything about his own parents. No one even knew who they were, just that his name was Uzumaki Naruto. "Yes, child. Your father is the Yondaime." Naruto's eyes widen.

"What?!" Though only a whisper, that one word cut through the entire atmosphere in the room.

"It was your father's wish to hide your true name from prying eyes, if only to protect you from those who held a grudge against the fourth's name. I made a vow to obey his wishes, concealing your identity as his son and trying to give you as normal of a childhood as possible... (He laughed cynically) It seems all my plans have completely failed to protect you, my child."

"But! Kyuubi." At that one word, all three winced visibly. It seems Naruto knew more of the truth than they had anticipated. Oh well, no hiding the rest of the truth now.

"Your father never meant for you to be hated by the villagers. He wanted you to be seen as a *Hero* of this village, being burdened by a destiny beyond your control and yet continuously protecting the villagers from the threat of the Kyuubi no Youko as its container. He never imagined that the villagers would turn on you and start thinking of you as the scapegoat for their pain. For that pain, I am eternally sorry. (He sighs) I've tried my best to limit the damage, by forcing all the adults to never speak of this secret and hoping that the next generation will come to accept you. Heh. But I failed in that idea as well. Instead of seeing you as what you are, they simply followed their parent's example, and started to hate you too for no apparent reason." The third Hokage sighed again, and finally looked towards Naruto, he had lowered his head in shame as he explained everything. To his surprise, Naruto was smiling, albeit a small gently smile, but a smile nonetheless.

Naruto took a deep breath, calmed his racing heart slightly and looked towards his savior. "I never got to thank you!"

The older boy smiled. "I'm Iruka. I've just become a Chuunin and while I was walking home from my training, I heard a commotion at your place." At this point, Iruka lowered his head too in shame. "Nobody was willing to help, we all heard the screams but nobody else cared. So I came."

"Why? Why did you save me?"

"Huh, why wouldn't I?"

"I've heard of you. You're an orphan too! They probably died by the Nine Tails, right?"

"I won't deny the fact that I am an orphan and that both my parents did die fighting the Kyuubi!" Iruka walked closer and closer towards the young and fragile Naruto. His eyes, so young yet so frightened. No one deserves to hold that much anguish and fear in their eyes. Then, Iruka did something which surprised all members in the room, he pulled Naruto into a hug and continued his story. "But Naruto, you're not the demon Kyuubi. You are Naruto Uzumaki. You are you, that's all you can be, from now until the rest of your life."

Naruto was at first shocked into immobilization. But after the rest of Iruka's speech, he melted into the warmth of Iruka's arms. He had never, in his entire life, ever felt so safe and secure before. Never, had he ever been hugged this intimately and maternally. Never, had he felt so welcomed.

"I know the pain of loneliness. Sometimes, I watch you. You play pranks and cause havoc, acting like an idiot to get attention. No one to compliment, no one to acknowledge and most of all, no one to care. It was the most painful thing in life. I watched and I realized what a fool I have been to assume you were the same as everyone say. But a demon will not know pain, Naruto. It does not understand happiness, sadness, loneliness; all the Kyuubi knows is rage. You're not the Kyuubi, you're Naruto. Remember that."

Finally, Iruka released Naruto and he felt elated at seeing Naruto's brilliant smile again.

"Ahem" coughed the man with long white hair. "This is all so sentimental and sweet, but when can I finally get going?"

Naruto asked curiously: "Who are you?"

The man stood in a posing stance, feet apart with one hand raised up front. "It's been said that I'm the Toad Sennin. And that's not all. In the north, in the south, east and west... The legendary three ninja's white haired frog-summoning child! The handsome man that can silence a crying child! I am JIRAIYA-sama! That's me!!(1)"

Naruto blinked innocently. "Am I supposed to know about you?"

Jiraiya's mouth hanged open in speechlessness, while the third Hokage is rubbing his forehead, sweat dropping and slightly ashamed of Jiraiya's performance. Iruka was snickering to himself by Naruto's side.

The third Hokage sighed in shame but continued on with the rest of the discussion at hand. "Naruto, I'd like you to meet one of my own previous students, Jiraiya, one of the legendary Sennins of Konoha."

"It's nice to meet you, Jiraiya-san." Naruto bowed slightly in acknowledgement.

"Since I can't trust anyone here in Konoha to take care of you, I've asked Jiraiya to..."

"I can take care of Naruto, Hokage-sama." Iruka interrupted. Naruto shot up with hope.

Hokage shook his head. "I'm sorry, Iruka. But you are a new Chuunin and will be very busy working and other stuff. Not to mention, you are probably not strong enough to keep Naruto completely safe. With one failed murder attempt, how many more do you think will take place? I'm really sorry, Iruka, Naruto, but there is no other choice in the matter."

Seeing the disappointed looks on both Iruka and Naruto's faces, Hokage sighed again but refused to back down on his decision. "I've decided that it would be better to send Naruto to travel with Jiraiya, away from the potential assassins and hateful villagers in Konoha. Jiraiya is arguably the strongest person in Konoha, next to myself,

that is. Jiraiya would be able to look after you properly, protect you from any attempts on your life as well as train you into a powerful ninja as well."

"You're sending me away. You don't want me here." Naruto accused softly.

"No, that's not it at all, Naruto." The Hokage looked up pleadingly to Naruto, willing the six-year-old child to understand. "I don't want you to ever be hurt again. And the only way I can do that, isn't to lock you away from everybody, it's to make you so strong that you can fend for yourself, decide for yourself and make a life for yourself. I am offering you that freedom, Naruto. The freedom to be whoever and whatever you want to be."

Naruto gazed from the Hokage's pleading expression to Jiraiya's nonchalant one. "How do I know I can trust him?" pointing at Jiraiya.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! That's a good one, kiddo." Looking straight into Naruto's eyes. "Who do you think trained your father in the first place? Hell, people would beg, bribe, do anything to become my disciple and here you are, suspicious of me? The one and only Jiraiya-sama, master to the Genius hero, the Yondaime himself?"

"You trained my father?" Naruto asked incredulously.

"Of course!" Jiraiya scoffed. "Why? Don't believe me?"

"You don't look very strong.." Naruto said innocently, which immediately made Jiraiya's face fall. "You remind me more of a pervert than a Sennin." He sweat drops. "And you don't seem to be the responsible type either." Iruka and the third Hokage moved from chuckling to out right laughing.

"Heh. I think this is the start of a wonderful friendship, kiddo." grumbled Jiraiya.

A week after was the set off date for Jiraiya and Naruto's journey.

"I promise I'll be back, Iruka-niisan. And when I do, I'll become a very strong ninja and make both you and my father proud!"

"Ha ha ha. I'll be waiting for you, Naruto. Have a safe journey. And remember to write to me, okay?" Iruka called back.

"Kay!" Naruto turned around, and rushed towards Jiraiya who had already left several minutes before. Naruto stayed behind to say his final goodbyes to his most important person, Iruka-niisan, whom had just taken up a position as an office assistant in the Ninja academy. He would miss Iruka-niisan, as well as the third Hokage, and the ramen at Ichiraku. But to tell the truth, he was very excited about leaving Konoha as well. It'll be a great big adventure, a new start, a new beginning in his life.

"Wait up! Pervert Sennin." Since it was confirmed to Naruto that Jiraiya was in deed an open pervert, Naruto had called him 'pervert sennin' none stop. Partly for amusement and partly because it had become Jiraiya's unofficial nickname, given to him by Naruto.

After half a day of walking, they've finally reached the edges of the fire country, if he took one more step, he would have officially left his home country. Naruto took a deep gulp of air, and took that one step forward. Only then, did Naruto look back.

"Will we ever return? Eh, Pervert Sennin?"

"Yah, we will. Have faith, Naruto. Have faith."

Both turn back to their journey. However, once they have left the fire county, none of them had expected that they would leave it for the next six years.

It would be six years later, before Naruto finally found the courage to face the villages of whom had despised him since his birth. Six long

years of training and experience in the outside world, Naruto grew up rapidly, both physically and emotionally. The one thing that still held meaning to Naruto since his 6-year-old encounter with near death experience, believe it or not, was not nightmares or fear of rejection from the villagers of his hometown. The one remaining fragment that still ties Naruto to the hidden leaf village wasn't even the caring third Hokage or his favored Iruka-niisan (whom have kept in touch through letters). In fact, the only thing that still binds Naruto to his original home is the answer to a question that had plagued him for a very long time. What was so great about Konohagakure that his father - the Yondaime - would not only sacrifice his own life, but the future life of his son, to protect? What did his father see in Konoha that was worth so much pain and suffering? Naruto set out to find that answer.

(1) The incredibly long quote taken directly from Chapter 144 of the Naruto manga, page 1, translated by Inane and downloaded from Naruto fan. Thank you, Guys!

My god! I really didn't want to start this story while I was working on my Neon Genesis one, but this idea just refused to LEAVE my mind until I've finally gotten at least the plot written down. I swear, it's been haunting my DREAMS, damn it! ==;; So yeah, here's my very first Naruto fic. Don't ask me how it'll end, this story literary wrote itself. I have absolutely no control over it what so ever. So if there are any suggestions for this story, please send them to me via review because this particular story has no end in site currently. .

Um.. one thing I'd like to ask is: CAN ANYONE THINK OF A BETTER TITLE!? I really hate the one I'm currently using but I'm completely out of ideas. Pweety please! Title people! Okay, Read and Review.

Chapter 2

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test.

Warning: Naruto OOC. No pairings as of yet – don't know if I'll have any. PG-13. This story has a darker version of Naruto; he is very cynical, cold and somewhat rude. Um.. since this is a Nartuo-centric story, please don't be surprised if I don't put out too much detail on the other characters. I'm trying to develop Naruto first before I look at the other characters. OH and another warning, I DON'T LIKE SAKURA, so she may seem a bit pathetic, stupid and weak. Apologies to all Sakura fans, but she'll get better once she earns MY respect, in both this story and the anime/manga. Because I'm following the manga (and the anime series is pretty much the same), I'll be trying to move the plot along much faster so please be aware that sometimes, I rush through things and just give summaries.

...means "thoughts"

==== means "change of scene"

Chapter 1

Finally, after six years of travel, Jiraiya had decided it was time for both him and Naruto to return to Konoha. Both of them had their own reasons to choose such a time to return to Konoha. One, Naruto would make it back just in time to participate in the Konoha Academy graduation. Not that Naruto could possibly fail now, knowing what he knows about Ninja techniques and such. The good thing about

having the pervert Sennin as your guardian and sensei was that when ever he wishes to '*scout around for new inspiration for his books*' , that basically meant he'll just teach you a new technique and leave you to your own demise, sometimes for days on end. Naruto got use to his behaviors very soon though and they shared something like a love-hate relationship.

For the past six years, Jiraiya and Naruto had literary traveled around the world twice over. The Rain country, Stone, Sand, Wave, Grass, Lightning, Mist; you name it, they've been there. During their travels, Naruto had also matured a lot for his age, though for good or bad, it's still debatable. Emotionally, he doesn't trust people very often; he understood that for most people, if they knew what resided in him, would hate him immediately; so he doesn't readily trust easily. He had also become very cautious in his actions and not very talkative. Since there were usually only two people traveling together (him and Jiraiya), pranks and other jokes were not that appreciated. Naruto had also become rather anti-social, and very reserved with his thoughts. Physically, he was still considered short for his age, but had developed firm, lean muscles on every inch of his body. His Taijutsu was excellent. He excels in speed, power, stealth, agility and even sensory detection (using his Nine Tails senses). As for his knowledge in Ninjutsu and Genjutsu, he had vast amounts of Ninjutsu techniques at his disposal and he can manipulate his Chakra to render any Genjutsu useless. His only weakness is that he still does not have full control over his Chakra manipulation and control.

So the two of them set off to return to Konoha.

Naruto and Jiraiya arrived back in Konoha on the very day of the Konoha Academy Genin Selection Exam and Naruto made it just in time to participate in said exam. Every one was very surprised by his reappearance (those that remembered him anyway) but only Iruka showed any true delight in seeing him again. In the village, all the parents whom had recognized his whiskers like scars on his face felt

a little apprehension for his return, but the third Hokage had already announced that if anyone dares to make a move on the boy, they would be executed immediately. The children (those who remembered him at all), all remembered him to be the outcast he always were in the past and generally stayed out of his way, which he was fine with anyway.

Due to Naruto's sudden reappearance and registration to undertake the Academy Genin Selection Exam, he was put as the last to perform the test. And so, he spent most of his time sleeping, not caring of how the other children performed, nor was he interested in what the exam procedures were until his turn. Finally, it was Naruto's turn to take the test and be judged, the other children in the class were all curious as to his strengths, but they held not much hope for his scores.

The first test was to test his kunai throwing skills, which he completed onto the bull's-eye of a board even before Iruka finished speaking. The second test was to test his knowledge of the Ninja rules, in which he simply replied he didn't remember any of them. This infuriated Mizuki but Iruka gave Naruto the go ahead, this was because Naruto did have an excuse, considering he had only gone to the Academy school for less than one year (when he was 5) and couldn't possibly be expected to remember all the rules back then. But to finish the third and final test, Naruto had to complete a fully functional bunshin no jutsu. Naruto made no visible hand seals but his bunshin suddenly appeared next to the target and retrieved his kunai. Later, Naruto was announced to pass the Genin Selection exam.

Due to the unexpected addition to the student number, Iruka did not have any extra Shinobi head-protector to give to Naruto and so, he asked him out for Ramen instead (Naruto still loved Ramen). After eating at least 15 bowls of ramen at Ichiraku (Naruto of course), Naruto and Iruka visited the Heroes Memorial in Konoha. Iruka then reminded Naruto of his own life story and explained that at first, he too had hated Naruto because it was the Nine tails that had killed his

parents. But after watching Naruto grow up, he realized that Naruto and him were very much alike and that Naruto wasn't the Nine tails. Iruka apologized for not being there to help Naruto before and gave Naruto his own head-protector, stating that as long as Naruto wore his head protector, it would be as if Iruka himself was right next to him. Naruto smiled for the first time in 3 whole years and hugged Iruka tightly in appreciation.

Naruto then went to meet the third Hokage to get his ninja registration done and also asked the third Hokage if he could look at the image of his father (the forth Hokage). It was there, in front of his father's portrait that Naruto made his promise. He didn't really call Konoha home anymore and he didn't very much like the people here, but since his father was willing to sacrifice himself and the future of his son for this village, Naruto would honour his father's legacy and continue to protect Konoha for him, until the day he himself realise what was so important about Konoha. The third had overheard all of this and was about to explain to Naruto, but decided against it. It would be better for Naruto to learn for himself and create a home here for himself.

The next day, Naruto waited patiently on his seat while all the other children clown around. A few of the bullies tried to intimidate him like they did before he left but they didn't even get a raised eyebrow for their efforts. A girl named Sakura Haruno sat herself next to him and ogled the infamous Uchiha Sasuke. When the names of the members of team 7 were read out, only Sakura had any expression (happiness to be paired with Sasuke). Naruto didn't even flinch but all the other students were still wondering why he was paired with Uchiha Sasuke unless he was really weak. The truth of the matter was that Naruto had told Iruka to let him pass but still retain the same status as he had been before he left the Academy 6 years ago, as the lowest ranked member of the class. Iruka didn't know why he requested this but followed his wish anyway since the third Hokage also made such a request.

They waited for 3 hours in class for their late sensei. When Naruto finally felt the man's Chakra, in a fit of rage, he threw a kunai at Kakashi, which was caught by the Jounin ninja of course. Kakashi smiled and laughed nervously at the children and apologized for his lateness. The introductions were made with the only interesting part coming from Naruto: "My name is Uzumaki Naruto. I like ... (pause)... Ramen. I dislike many things. I have no ambition and no dream but ... my only wish is to understand why my father was willing to die to protect this village."

Kakashi was shocked by this response, and he concluded that Naruto knows about his father. After that, Kakashi gave his normal speech about survival training the next day. Naruto ignored the no breakfast rule and ate some that morning before going to the training grounds. After another 3 hours of waiting, Kakashi finally arrived and told them the new rules to the real Genin Selection Exam.

While Sakura and Sasuke immediately hid in the surrounding areas, Naruto just stood where he was and stared. Kakashi asked him if he was going to attack anytime soon or did he have a strategy. Naruto simply answered: "I have no wish to become a genin or anything in life. I have no reason to fight against you for those stupid bells. If the other two wanted it so much to become Shinobis, let them. I'll just wait for the next time."

Kakashi was silently seething at Naruto's nonchalant attitude. In a way, Naruto was kind enough to volunteer being the one that fails so that Sasuke and Sakura could become genins. But him simply giving up without even trying infuriated Kakashi and he snapped back: "Expecting a result without even trying, willing to wait for an uncertain future.. If you continue having these kinds of attitude, you will *never* understand why your father did what he did. You wouldn't even be able to go through half the things your father went through for Konoha. You are nothing but a coward that runs away from facing the past deeds of your father if you continue to turn your back from this absolute truth. The truth in which you yourself must undergo hardship to find answers for!" Naruto grew angry at Kakashi's

outburst and charged him, which was exactly what Kakashi had wanted him to do in the first place.

Firstly, Naruto attacked Kakashi using Taijutsu to test out his reflexes and reaction rate. Since Naruto was already very good with Taijutsu, both Kakashi and Naruto had to parry each other for some time. After dodging Naruto's fist, Kakashi grabbed one of Naruto's arm, slammed him onto the ground, twisted said arm at the wrist and elbow until Naruto was rendered immovable with Kakashi sitting on his back.

Kakashi was about to speak when the Naruto in his hand suddenly disappeared. Realizing it was a Kage Bunshin (Shadow Replication) he was fighting; Kakashi saw in the corner of his eye another Naruto rushing at him at top speed. He couldn't dodge in time so Kakashi blocked the kick with his arms. The block had enough force to almost crack Kakashi's bones as he was dragged along the sand due to the momentum and impact.

Naruto didn't stop though, as he ran after Kakashi again and he threw several kunais in his direction. Kakashi jumped up to avoid the kunais but widen his eyes as Naruto performed his first seal, the Gokakyuu no jutsu (Powerful Fireball) (1). After the giant flame blast, all that was left was a burning log, Kakashi had used Kawarimi no jutsu to replace himself with an inanimate object. However, Naruto did not lose focus as he immediately threw several shurikans towards a certain tree near the edge of their battle. Kakashi jumped away from the tree only milliseconds before those shurikans reached it and blasted half the tree into small bits of burning wood chips. "Chakra reinforced shurikans", thought Kakashi as several Naruto's (Kage Bunshins) started attacking at the same time.

Surrounding him first, then striking forward one at a time in a motion of in out in out of Kakashi's danger zone. Even though Kakashi was keeping up with their movements but he was also feeling slightly pressured. He then realized he doesn't have enough time to strike down any of the Naruto Bunshins before another takes it's place, and it also gave him no time to perform any seals either. After quickly

blocking one of the clone's attacks, Kakashi jumped up into the air and performed another type of fire blast seal, Katon Karyuu Endan (Fire Type: Fire Dragon Blast) (2). The massive flame blast burnt up all the remaining clones but the real Naruto was nowhere to be found.

Kakashi landed silently, finding himself enjoying the challenges that Naruto had given him, though a little bit out of breath than usual. Since he was already on his guard, suspicious of Naruto's attacks, Kakashi immediately noticed the many kunais and shurikans flying his way. Wondering why Naruto would do the same thing twice, he was slightly taken back when one of the Kunais set off a trap directly behind him. He dodged the rest of on coming weapons that the trap had flung at him, wondering when did Naruto had the time to set up such an elaborate trap. That was the moment he was attacked by a hidden Sasuke from his side.

Kakashi mentally sighed. He had completely forgotten that he still had two other students to content with, not just Naruto. And Sasuke seems to be just as good, if a little bit less cautious than Naruto had been. Defending against all of Sasuke's punches and kicks, he was surprised that Sasuke actually touched the bells at all, and immediately kicked away himself. Naruto had not been interested in the bells, if he had been, then maybe the bells would have been long gone by now. During the previous fights, Naruto had only been angry at Kakashi directly and fought him over said statements, not for the purpose of getting the bells. Turning his attention back to the situation at hand, Kakashi realized that Sasuke had repeated the same seals as Naruto, the Gokakyuu no jutsu (Powerful Fireball technique). But this time, Kakashi did not use Kawarimi no jutsu to escape the flames. Instead, he went underground and used Doton: Shinjuu Zanshu no jutsu (Earth type: Inner Decapitation technique) (3) against Sasuke, grabbing him by his feet and pulling him down until only his head is above the ground.

It was just at that moment that Sakura came through the bushes and saw this scene. She had been trying to find Sasuke for a while now,

since Naruto's fight against Kakashi. After hearing Sasuke's grunt of pain, she immediately ran after the sound, only to come out of the clearing and seeing Sasuke's supposedly decapitated head on the ground. Naturally, she screamed then fainted, even though Kakashi was still there crouching and looking at her curiously. Damn, I didn't even get to use any Genjutsu on her and she still fainted. Oh well.

Slightly disappointed at Sakura's bad performance, Kakashi was completely caught off guard when Naruto materialized behind him and tried to stab him with a kunai. Kakashi barely missed the attack though his shoulder did get scratched. Naruto then threw said kunai in Kakashi's direction. While Kakashi was busy avoiding the kunai, Naruto slammed his left hand into the ground, grabbed onto Sasuke's shoulder and pulled him out of the ground. With his free right hand, Naruto then threw a smoke bomb on the ground, creating a smoke screen and escaped with Sasuke. Kakashi was starting to get nervous as to what ideas Naruto has when he freed Sasuke.

On the other side of the clearing, hidden behind leaves, Sasuke wrenched his shoulder out of Naruto's hold and glared at him. Naruto glared right back at Sasuke, then moved his mouth slowly, mentally wondering if Sasuke could lip-read. Turns out he was lucky, Sasuke could lip-read, though not much and you had to go slow for him to contemplate the sentence completely.

=Look, moron. I don't like this either, but if you want those bells, you're gonna have to work with me here.=

Sasuke glared at Naruto for a while later, then finally sighed silently.
=Fine. What's the plan?=-

Naruto nodded back to him, indicating he too accepts this short truce between them and laid out his plan of attack. Within the visible clearing, Kakashi had gone into high alert. With both Naruto and Sasuke working together, it would be a lot tougher to beat them both at the same time. He was wondering whether he should use his Sharingan when Sakura finally woke up.

"Huh? Where am I?" Remembering, Sakura immediately sat up. "WHERE'S SASUKE?!" She yelled.

That was the exact moment that Naruto and Sasuke rushed out of their hiding places and attacked Kakashi. Several Naruto's (Kage Bunshins – Shadow Replications) rushed towards Kakashi from the front. After a few blocks and blows, only one Naruto remained, the real Naruto. While Kakashi was concentrating hard against Naruto, he reacted too slowly when Sasuke appeared by his side, swiping Kakashi off his feet when he swung his legs in a half-circle while crouching and stretched his hand out to grab the bells. Kakashi saw this last move, jumped up and hit both Naruto and Sasuke in the face with both his legs. Both Naruto and Sasuke flew backwards due to the impact. When Kakashi finally landed from his jump, Sasuke was holding both bells triumphantly in his hand.

After several seconds of stunted silence, Sakura screamed out her joy, running towards the slightly injured Sasuke, and hugged him so tightly that he couldn't breathe. She kept on re-iterating the same sentence. "Sasuke is SOOO COOL! Sasuke is SOOO GREAT!! Sasuke is the GREATEST!!!"

Kakashi recovered from his shock, lifting one hand behind his head and scratched it sheepishly. "Well, I guess both Sasuke and Naruto have passed this test then." Sakura froze on those words, immediately letting go of an almost unconscious Sasuke, rushed at Kakashi and screamed out to him in protest. "Does that mean I FAILED!!!??? NOOOOOOO!!! I CANT FAIL!!!! Please give me another chance!! Kakashi sensei. PLEASEEEEEEE!!!"

Both Kakashi and Naruto winched at her high pitch voice. "No." came Sasuke's soft but determined answer. "You are too weak to become a useful Shinobi. You should quit while you're ahead, Sakura."

Sakura almost started crying as she imagined her days without Sasuke's constant companion. That is, until Kakashi interrupted.

"You're wrong Sasuke. Do you know why I said both you and Naruto passed?"

"Because we were the ones who got the bell." Answered Sasuke simply.

Kakashi shook his head and was about to answer but Naruto interrupted him. "Sakura can have the second bell if she wants." While the other three looked back at him in question, Naruto answered: "I'm not interested in the bells." Smirking at Kakashi, he continued: "I just wanted to piss Kakashi off, that's all."

Kakashi sighed and shook his head in resignation as Sakura jumped up with joy. Loosing his patient, he shouted: "SHUT UP! ALL OF YOU." Silence ensured. Kakashi then explained that the whole purpose of this exercise wasn't set up to test their individual strengths and weaknesses; it was to test their teamwork! With a team of 3 genins, they should be able to help each other gather the bells from a jounin. The test was set up this way to see who would be willing to work with their partners to accomplish a difficult task. He referred to what he said before; stating that why both Naruto and Sasuke had passed was because they **WORKED TOGETHER AS A TEAM!**

After that speech, Kakashi then told them their individual weaknesses. Sasuke was over-confident of his abilities, too arrogant to analyse the situation properly, and too self-righteous to work with another. Sakura was too obsessed with just following Sasuke and ignoring her other teammate to the point that she was completely useless during a mission. Naruto's weakness was being difficult to motivate at all in completing even a simple task and reacts too emotionally when push comes to shove. Overall, they had plenty of weaknesses to overcome within their genin days. After a long pause, Kakashi smiled and confirmed that even though they need to work on their teamwork, this team 7, he passed them! Sakura was jumping for joy again, Sasuke was smirking while Naruto was silently contemplating Kakashi's words.

After that, Naruto walked silently back towards the Heroes memorial. After a long while, his official guardian and sensei, Jiraiya, suddenly visited him.

"So, how was it? Your team, that is."

"I'm paired with Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura."

"Heh. Uchiha, huh.. Damn, must be a spoilt genius brat then, right?"

Naruto lowered his head. "I guess."

The silence stretched for a while longer until Naruto asked his guardian a question.

Naruto: "Why did you bring me back now?"

"Because I thought it was high time for you to come back."

"Why?" Naruto insisted.

Jiraiya signed. "This is the place where you were born. The place where your father and mother called home, and as such, it should be your home too. I know you don't really have much good memory about this place. But it's really a wonderful place to call home, you know."

Naruto turned around and looked at Jiraiya with sad eyes. "How can I call it home if I don't feel welcomed here?"

Jiraiya looked straight back at him without batting an eye. "Because soon enough, you will learn what is precious in the Konoha that you won't find anywhere else." Smiling at Naruto's confused expression, Jiraiya answered again: "Haven't you already found someone important here?" After a few minutes of thought, Naruto nodded as he remembered Iruka. Jiraiya asked again: "Would you fight to protect this important person?" Naruto nodded again without resistance. "Then you would become even stronger."

Naruto looked confused again. Jiraiya raised his eyes to the names on the memorial. "Remember Naruto, true strength comes only to those whom are trying to protect their loved ones. When you have someone to protect, you will understand what I mean."

Naruto nodded, though uneasily, turned to look at the memorial. "Just like father did."

Jiraiya nodded in silence.

He protected all his loved ones in Konoha.. The Yondaime was a truly strong person...

(1) Powerful Fireball skill – same as Sasuke in book 1, Chapter 6

(2) Hokage's flame blast – Fire Dragon Napalm - in book 14, Chapter 120

(3) Earth Type: Inner decapitation skill – same as the one used by Kakashi in Book 1, Chapter 6, against Sasuke

Okay, umm... please read and reply. As I said before in the prologue, I really don't know how the story will turn out until it does, so any suggestions are appreciated. Um.. if there are any constructive criticism as to how I've set up the story, I'm also very willing to listen to them. But no FLAMES please.

As for pairings, it's still an open option. The only pairing I really don't like is to pair Sakura and Naruto together, I just really don't think he deserves her. o

The title replacement name still stands, I'm waiting for anyone who has a good replacement name for this crappy title. Suggestions anyone?

Oh another thing I need to warn you guys about. I have a very bad habit of leaving the story hanging, so I might be very slow to update,

please bare with me because I'm also currently working on another story for Evangelion. And when Uni starts, I'm beat.

Fine. Enough blabbing. If you like it, tell me via reviewing. If you don't like it, tell me "WHY" by reviewing. Just review people! Thank you!!

Chapter 3

People! Request for a Beta reader that wouldn't mind going over my tenses and grammatical errors. I'm actually an English as secondary language student, so I consider myself pretty good already except I have a major weakness when it comes to tenses and grammar. nn;; I can't help it!

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survives a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and has to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test.

Reply to my wonderful reviewers:

Insanity: I agree, some old ladies are scary. Naruto in this fic is always gonna hide his true strength, not even sure whether =I= know his true strength. Gonna have slightly more dialogue in this one and I am trying to slow it down a bit, but I will cut some parts out because it is just repeating the manga and anime. Don't worry about Sakura, I'm gonna be making her grow up fast.

TokehGecko: My god! I absolutely love your story "There where when is now", so it's quite an honour to have you review. nn Thank you!! I needed to keep the fights shorter than normal because I put a lot of detail into them and I admit, they are very hard to write. But don't worry, the fight against Haku and Zabuza in the next few chapters is gonna rock!!! That is, when I get around to it. nn;;; And yes, Naruto knows about Summoning no jutsu and Rasengan.

SilverKnight7: Updating! Updating!

Licht Sieger: I hope it gets nicer then!! nn Umm... not very sure about the pairings (NarutoxIno - if she ever lets go of her crush on Sasuke; NarutoxTenten - I have a feeling she's more interested in Neji). Yeah, I can't recall a time where he talked to them either.

EclipseAzNGTX: Thank you! I'm most definitely continuing with all these encouragement.

Gromph: Thank you very much! Updating now!

Kakrotta: Thank you for emailing me! And I will post more!

Foxgrl: Yep, Continuing.

Maguswizard: In this fic, the Rasengan comes in 3 different formats. nn Just read and find out.

E: I am trying hard to keep the dynamics between Naruto and Jiraiya as they are now in the manga. nn I'll try to get all the spelling and grammatical errors right this time around, but because I don't have a beta, it'll most definitely not be 100%. Sorry.

Drownin' in my Tears: This plot is flexible. Hope you like it.

Emotwo: Sakura is a bit air headed, isn't she. But she will get better, I promise. Umm... not sure about Hinata's crush on Naruto, I'll probably make her become attracted to him as time goes on, rather than have her already develop the crush.

Sano-kun: "Searching for Meaning"... I guess that could work, but as I said, =I= don't even know how this story is gonna develop so the underlying theme might change. I'll think about it, Thank you for the suggestion though!

Alyana: I'm honoured that my story is able to capture your interest. Thank you very much and I'll do my very best not to disappoint.

Ani1: Another for NarutoXHinata... maybe. Not sure. Yeah, when I suggested to my siblings that I'd make him a little bit dark and

mysterious like Shino, they were like Oo;; but it turned out quite all right, I think.

Mr-omega-007: Nope, Naruto is not a pervert. Though he does know exactly how to manipulate them using his Sexy no jutsu.

Ookima: Thank you. nn I try to keep it as original and stand alone as much as possible.

Star: I personally don't mind Yaoi. But at the current rate of this story's plot, I don't think there is ever going to be anything between Sasuke and Naruto other than mutual respect. Sorry.

Lyxeria: Iruka and Naruto share something like a distant family connection. Not as close as the manga because Naruto grew up with Jiraiya instead of Iruka. But they are both very close to one another and they trust each other whole heartedly. As for pairings... I don't think it'll happen. I like having Iruka as Naruto's big brother figure. I think they need to know that they do have a family out there worried about them.

Hmr: Yes. It is a very unique story and it has a completely uncertain future. Hell, even I don't know the future and I'm the damn writer. But so many possibilities, decisions, decisions...

Fiona Larkin: Not much =zip =zip =zip in this one, thank you!

Brice Humphry: Another one for NaruHina. I'll be sure to keep that in mind. Thank you for your support. I know it is a bit fast so this one is ... eh.. slower.

Babowonsuni: The timeline of this story will basically follow the manga's original plot but because Naruto is completely different, the endings of each arc will be very different. Just watch.

Ventris: I would like to see how it turns out as well.

Wolfs Catalyst: Sakura will get better. She's just not gonna get Naruto, that's all. nn Thank you for reviewing.

Kyubi: Kakashi doesn't lose his cool, he's just gets a bit surprised, that's all. Unfortunately, in this story, he gets surprised quite often. nn Hope you enjoy though because this is probably the only place where anyone can turn Kakashi speechless.

Chief316: "Restoration of Faith". That sounds really good. Thank you for the suggestion and the review. I'll try to get the grammar right but since I'm writing very fast currently, it might take awhile.

Judiann: It seems Naruto and Hinata are the main pairings that people want. Guess I'm gonna have to try and incorporate then. Thank you very much for your review. And yeah, I think the pairing will work too.

Evil Shi-chan: Since his previous baby sitter left, it is the Hokage's responsibility to buy him the ramen but ordered someone else to deliver it to him. But thanks for pointing that out. Wow! You're really into the grammar and tenses, aren't you?! Oo;; Okay, okay.. I'll do my best once I get this one out, but don't be surprised if it doesn't turn out right.

Ccslover: Fine. No couples till later but I'll still have to put some in, since Sakura likes Sasuke already.

KuroiHikari: I think Naruto kick ass too! Not sure about the pairings though. We'll see.

Midnight Fairy: Thank you for your support. I'll try to get it out as fast as possible.

MY GOD!!! THAT MAY BE THE LAST TIME I REPLY TO ALL MY REVIEWERS!! THANK YOU EVERYONE!!! I HAVE **NEVER** RECIEVED THAT MANY REVIEWS FOR A SINGLE STORY BEFORE!!! THANK YOU ALL

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. This story has a darker version of Naruto; he is very cynical, cold and somewhat rude. Um.. since this is a Nartuo-centric story, please don't be surprised if I don't put out too much detail on the other characters. In this chapter, Naruto will become exceptionally cruel to Sakura, so people you have been warned. Apologies to all Sakura fans, but she'll get better, I promise. I've got it all planned out in my head how Sakura finally builds a backbone and starts taking Ninja training seriously. Um... Grammar errors are bound to be there somewhere so don't mind me.

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed"

Chapter 2

After several weeks of these tedious missions, all three of the genins in team 7 have become pretty restless. Soon, Naruto had finally had enough and his anger and frustration burst.

"When I signed up to become a Ninja, I did not think I would spend my time baby sitting, doing gardening, painting walls, taking dogs out for walks or finding missing animals." Though said coldly, his voice hid the undertone of rage.

Hokage sighed and was about to tell him it couldn't be helped, but he was interrupted by Naruto again: "Why can't we have at least 1 C rank mission? It's a lot more entertaining than all these D ranks." Sighing again, Hokage asked the other 2 team members if they agreed with Naruto. Sasuke raised his hand in agreement almost immediately, and Sakura also raised her hand once she saw Sasuke doing the same.

"Why don't you just give them a C rank mission if it'll shut them up for a bit." A nasal voice called out from the doorway.

Naruto's eyebrow twitched, he quickly turned around, raising a finger and directed it straight at his guardian, shouting in anger: "AND **WHERE** have you BEEN these 3 weeks?"

"I was busy." Jiraiya replied with a shrug.

"Yeah right! Probably peeking into the female public baths again." Naruto retorted hotly, folding his arms together and glaring at his guardian.

"If you must know, I was gathering information for my next book." Jiraiya tried to explain.

"Meaning you *were* peeking into the female public baths! Jeez! Don't you *EVER* grow up, Pervert Sennin!" Naruto's eyes continued to twitch in irritation as he snorted in disgust.

"Stop calling me a pervert, you shrimp!" Jiraiya scolded, starting to get really annoyed at the blonde boy.

"Pervert! Pervert! Pervert! OPEN PERVERT!!!" With both hands in front of his mouth, Naruto yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Why you ungrateful little..." Jiraiya threatened with narrowed eyes as he lunged towards the blonde boy.

Before Jiraiya could reach him, Naruto had performed a seal, the Oroike no jutsu seal (Sexy no Jutsu). Immediately, Jiraiya forgot about his previous arguments as he started drooling over the sexy, naked *Naruta* . Also at this time, several people in the same room spurted a large amount of blood flowing from their noses, some even rendered unconscious. These people included Kakashi (who was on the ground hyperventilating), the third Hokage (who had fallen over his chair and continued to twitch while lying on the floor), Iruka (who was currently sticking a lot of tissues up his nose to stop the blood flow), and even Sasuke (who had a hand covering his nose and mouth though a little trickle of blood can be seen, and he was currently standing with his back to *Naruta*).

Seeing that, Sakura immediately launched herself at Naruto and screamed at him until he returned to his normal form.

"Jeez! I didn't think Konoha had so many perverts." Naruto added while smirking.

Cough, cough. " *Finet. I'll geeve youd a C rand mizzion .*" replied the Hokage, still reeling from blood loss. After detailing the protection mission, he introduced their client, a mister Tazuna. Afterwards, they set off on their first C rank mission.

The group set out, traveling on the way with few complaints. Sakura became curious and asked if the Wave country had a ninja academy of their own. Kakashi was just about to answer when Naruto interrupted them and started explaining the whole situation with the 5 kages and the 5 most powerful countries in the world currently. Sakura was surprised that Naruto knew something in which she did not, and so she asked him: "How did you know all that?" Naruto simply replied that he has been there before.

While Naruto was explaining about the "The five Great Shinobi Countries", Kakashi noticed a suspicious puddle of water on the ground. Once they walk passed it, two people emerged from the puddle and started attacking the group. Kakashi was visually seen being caught in their deadly chain and then ripped apart by it. The three Genins and Tazuna-san all fell into shock. Sakura screamed in fear as the two enemies raced towards Naruto to kill him. They've just surrounded Naruto when Sasuke came to the rescue. He struck their combined chain onto a nearby tree with a shuriken and kunai, and then managed to hit them both in the face using his feet. The two opponents released the chain from their holder and started running away towards different targets. One aimed at the paralyzed Naruto and the other ran towards Tazuna. Sasuke made a split second decision, choosing to keep Sakura and their client safe and leaving Naruto on his own. However, just when the enemy reached Naruto, that Naruto disappeared into a cloud of smoke, he was a bunshin.

Immediately after the bunshin disappeared, the real Naruto reappeared behind the opponent that went to attack him. Naruto grabbed onto his opponent's hand, slamming him down onto the ground and twisted said arm painfully until it almost broke at the elbow, rendering the man immobile. Kakashi had also reappeared, unharmed to take out the other opponent.

Even though Kakashi had planned on tying the two of them up and then asking Tazuna-san what was going on, Naruto did not have the patience to wait. He twisted the arm of his captive brutally, causing the man to scream in pain.

"Who is your boss? What is your objective?" Naruto asked coldly, without mercy.

Wanting to remain silent, the man screamed again as Naruto twisted his arm even more. "TALK GOD DAMN IT OR LESS YOU WILL KNOW THE MEANING OF PAIN!!!" Naruto shouted his threats.

"Stop it! You're gonna break his arm!" yelled the other man, frantic at watching his brother in so much pain.

"Naruto, stop. They have already been beaten, we don't need to torture them." Ordered Kakashi in a calm but slightly tensed tone of voice.

" **LIKE HELL I DON'T!** " Naruto yelled at Kakashi as his eyes started to gleam red while Kyuubi's Chakra started leaking out. He then spoke to his captive with a softer but deadly serious tone of voice, reflecting his current cruel desires. "Talk or you will wish that I had killed you now rather than later. I am a master of pain and I know over 2 hundred ways to make a man cry in agony."

"Stop! **STOP!** I'll talk. PLEASE STOP!!!!!" The man yielded. Naruto loosens his grip on the arm he held slightly as well as the three painful pressure points in which his other hand had been pressing on the man's neck recently.

"Our boss.. Our boss is the Devil of the Mist. He.. We were hired to take out that old man," indicating Tazuna. "That's all. We were only following orders. That's all there is.. PLEASE LET US GO!" the man pleaded rapidly.

"Paid by who?" The icy voice of Naruto's sent shivers down the man's spine.

"Naruto, stop it. If you continue, you're just as bad as the two of them!" Kakashi commanded, seriously considering the option of physically stopping his student.

Naruto glared right back at him with blood red eyes and slitted pupils. The features of his eyes shocked all four of the group members, and Kakashi started to sweat a little. If the seal is broken now, then there is no way to stop him. He thought.

Naruto turned away, closing his eyes for a moment; he took a deep breath and released it. His eyes reopened again to reveal their normal sky-blue shade. He released the arm of the opponent he was holding, but didn't release the hold he had on the man's neck. The free hand is raised slightly, forming a 2 finger pointing seal. "Hakke Juni Tenketsus Yonshyou" yelled Naruto, and he quickly pushed 12 points on his opponent's back in seemingly random order. After that, he completely releases his captive, turned and started walking towards the other enemy, still held incarcerated by Kakashi. Naruto then did the same thing with the second enemy.

Kakashi was confused over what Naruto did to the two of them. The previous man, having been just released, thought that he could take his chance at revenge. He launched himself at Naruto, aiming to strike his back. Both Sakura and Sasuke stood ready this time, awaiting the blow but it never came. They were again shocked when the man tried to do certain seals, and suddenly ended up screaming on the floor half way through making the seals. His body continued to shudder in pain, while the chakra he had summoned for the seal slowly dissipated, leaving a burning sensation through out his body. .

"What did you do to him and me?!" yelled the other man in fright, having watched his brother shake in agony.

Naruto answered calmly. "12 of your most precious opening points on the Chakra inner coil system have been rendered useless for life. If you try to use any Chakra at all, it will burn your inner coils as well as your surrounding organs. I suggest you never try to use Chakra again unless you wish to die."

Shaking out of his reverie, Kakashi released his prisoner also and the group slowly but surely left on their journey again. Not wanting to make Naruto even more angry, Kakashi decided not to press Naruto for the reasons why he acted the way he did against the two mist Nins.

After Tazuna-san had explained the real situation to Kakashi and the kids, they all decided to continue on with the mission though Naruto had become even more quiet and sullen than usual. None of the others tried to talk to him for they all knew that the only question to come out of their mouths would be to ask him about that new technique he had used against the Demon brothers. This particular question however, they were certain, he wouldn't answer anyway. The group continued on their journey in silence, passing through the rivers and seas without incident, even admiring the new, yet unfinished bridge with awe in silence. Finally, they reached the shores of the Wave country.

The group walked for a while. Suddenly, Naruto stops in his tracks and threw a kunai into the surrounding bushes. Sakura and Tazuna gasped in fright, waiting for the next attack, but the rest of boys just stood still. For a while, nothing moved, Sakura breathed in a sigh of relief.

"Naruto. Could you stop acting cool for a second!" she yelled. "Stop trying to scare us to death!" Tazuna agreed and glared at the non-moving boy. However, Naruto ignored them both. Naruto had narrowed his eyes while Kakashi went to investigate what he had hit.

It was a snow rabbit. Sakura took one look at the freaked out rabbit and felt sorry for it. She settled in to glare at Naruto. "Naruto! Look what you did!! You scared the life out of it!! You moron!" Naruto continued to ignore Sakura and shifted his gaze to a position inside a near by tree. Suddenly, a shifting of wind was felt by Naruto instead of being heard.

"EVERYONE, *DUCK* !!" shouted Kakashi. Sasuke ducked instinctively to his instruction; Naruto had to push Sakura and Tazuna-san out of the way while he too, ducked under the spinning weapon. Once the massive spinning sword flew by their heads, the group looked up in surprise. A man, whose face was wrapped up in bandages, stood on a massive sword like object embedded in a tree a few meters up from the ground.

Naruto silently analysed the man's ability and ignored the conversation between Kakashi and Zabuza. He already knew that Kakashi was the renowned Copy Cat Kakashi, so it was no surprise about the Sharingan and it didn't interest him anyway. Mist Missing Nin. Specialty - silent killings within the mist. Over confident in his own abilities. Best way to defeat him is to trick him and force his hand, once confused, he'll be easy picking. Naruto resigned himself to sit outside of this battle. He didn't really want to get so involved in a fight against a Jounin anyway.

While a thick, heavy cloud of mist surrounded the group from Zabuza's Kirigakure no Jutsu (Hidden Mist Technique), Naruto had closed his eyes and concentrated. When he re-opened his eyes, they had become a different shade of violet, enhancing his vision to be able to see through the thick mist. Mixing his original blue Chakra and Ninetail's red Chakra, to create something like an intermediate Chakra with the violet colour.

Kakashi had tried to calm his students down by telling them he will ensure their safety, but these comforting thoughts were immediately cut off in Naruto's mind as he suddenly pushed the other members of the team away and parried Zabuza's big sword with his own small kunai. Being pushed back by the heavy weight of the big sword,

Naruto was relieved that Kakashi had managed to grab onto Zabuza, rendering him immobile, and giving Naruto the time to drag Tazuna away from the fighting.

After a few seconds of watching water clones beat water clones, Naruto was slightly disappointed when Kakashi fell easily into Zabuza's Water prison trap. He frowned as the new Zabuza water clone disappeared from sight and reappeared instantly in front of him. He easily blocked the water clone's weak kick with one arm and slammed his other hand's palm into the centre of the water clone. Using the Jyuuken style of fighting, he pushed Chakra out of that open palm which resulted in blasting the clone back into water molecules.

From the wide-eyed expression on the real Zabuza's face, he seemed surprised that a supposedly weak genin was able to beat his water clone. What did he expect, the water clones are 10 times weaker than the original. And Naruto (if he really wanted to) could very well rival the mist jounin in strength.

Zabuza narrowed his eyes in annoyance and started ranting about his past being the devil and how he had killed all his classmates. Naruto ignored the talk and concentrated on thinking up a plan to free Kakashi, he still didn't want to use his full power against the mist jounin so he'll find a way to leave the rest of the fight to his supposed teacher. Coming to a decision, Naruto interrupted Zabuza's continual monologue. "Enough with the speeches, are we gonna fight or not?!" Naruto rolled his eyes at Zabuza's resulting angry expression.

Being unable to move from his position holding Kakashi in a prison, Zabuza had made several more water clones (Mizu Bunshins) to fight against Naruto. Naruto rolled his eyes again at Zabuza's dangerous underestimation of his abilities. When Zabuza's clones started running towards him, Naruto performed his favourite seal, Taiyuu Kage Bunshin no jutsu (Multiple Shadow Replication technique). At once, there appeared over 30 Naruto clones clashing against the 10 Zabuza clones. Simply put, the Zabuza clones

became overwhelmed and the Naruto clones immediately tried to close in on the real Zabuza.

Having seen how his clones were nothing compared to Kakashi's brat of a student, Zabuza decided to try something different. He called upon a tidal wave of water to crush all of Naruto's clones at once. When the water finally subsided, Naruto surprised Zabuza once again when a Wind shuriken (Kaze Shuriken) flew passed the air at high speeds, aiming straight at Zabuza. Calmly, Zabuza stretched his free hand out and grabbed onto the massive shuriken before it came to close.

Thinking that was all the kid had up his sleeve, Zabuza was taken back again when another shuriken detached itself from underneath the one he was holding and continued to fly towards him. Shadow Shuriken no jutsu! Kisama! Zabuza mentally swore and jumped up quickly, just in the nick of time to avoid the shuriken cutting off his legs. Once again to his shock, the shadow shuriken disappeared into a cloud of smoke revealing the hidden Naruto, whom immediately threw a kunai in Zabuza's direction.

Being cornered and having no choice, Zabuza jumped away to avoid the kunai, but it still managed to get a scratch his face. Furious at the damn annoying brat, Zabuza tried to throw the shuriken currently in his hand back towards Naruto but was stopped by the newly freed Kakashi. Naruto, on the other hand, landed lightly on the water's surface, trying to gain his balance. Watching both Zabuza and Kakashi perform the powerful jutsu – Suiryuu Dan no Jutsu!! (Water Dragon Blast no jutsu), Naruto decided now would be a very good time to leave the vicinity. He quickly left the water's edge just in time to watch both the Water Dragons cancel each other out.

Seeing the torrents of water coming towards them due to the previous assault, Naruto quickly grabbed onto Sakura and Tazuna, one with each hand, yelled at Sasuke to get out of the way just as he himself jumped away to avoid the impact of the water blast. Kakashi then played a Genjutsu trick on Zabuza to confuse him, while he completed the seals for Suiton: Dabakufu no Jutsu (Water Element:

Water Explosion no jutsu), Naruto yelled at the rest of the group to hold on to any big trees as tightly as possible, because the resulting force of water almost knocked all of them off their branches.

Finally thinking this battle was over, Naruto calmed down slightly. But the peace was interrupted as flying needles suddenly flew across the clearing and struck through Zabuza's throat, surprising even Naruto. Damn! I didn't even feel his presence at all, Naruto thought as he narrowed his gaze angrily at the intruder, a young hunter Nin from the Mist.

After a long pause for introductions, Naruto narrowed his eyes again as the Mist hunter Nin picked up the supposedly dead body of Zabuza. If his memories served him right, hunter Nins usually burn the body of their victims immediately. This is suspicious. And just when the boy was about to leave their presence, Naruto snapped back at him. "Hey! Aren't hunter Nins usually suppose to burn the body of their victims immediately after death and bring back only the head?"

The boy stopped moving for just a split second before Kakashi quickly turned around, his eye wide with realization, but it was already too late. The boy had made a few quick hands seals and disappeared with Zabuza's body intact. His voice rang overhead: "Until the next time we meet." Kakashi cursed visibly at his own incompetence, but there was nothing else that could be done. Naruto snarled in anger at being tricked, he didn't like being overmatched. Soon after the impromptu battle, the group decided to leave the area, the sooner the better, but things became complicated again when Kakashi fell unconscious due to exhaustion.

"Kakashi sensei! Are you alright?! What happened?! Kakashi sensei!!" Sakura screamed in panic, frantically shaking Kakashi's unmoving body. Tazuna, too, became a bit pale at the realisation that he only had three kids to protect him now, if the jounin was to fall dead. Naruto calmly pressed his fingers against Kakashi's throat, finding his pulse.

"He's fine!" Naruto emphasized. "Just exhausted from the overuse of his left eye."

Sakura sighed in relief but the relief didn't last long. "What will we do now if they attack again?" She asked nervously.

Sasuke grunted. "We'll just have to beat them up. It's as simple as that." Even though he was already very shaken from simply watching the extraordinary fight between the two jounins, but he didn't want to look bad compared to Naruto. Sasuke was raging inside at how calm and collected Naruto had reacted to the whole thing, and he himself, had almost ran away as Kakashi had instructed them to do. If he couldn't even withstand *watching* these types of fights, then he would never be able to even *participate* , let alone defeat his brother.

"No, they won't be coming back so soon anyway." Naruto replied calmly as he stood up and looked at his other two team mates. "We have to carry Kakashi back to the village." They looked back at him in silence, waiting. Naruto sighed again, What good are team mates if they *don't* help each other, he thought as he performed his favourite seal for the second time that day. The Taiyuu Kage bunshin clones easily lifted Kakashi's unconscious body and started walking again. Naruto began leading the group when he was interrupted by an aggravated Sasuke.

"Who made you leader? If I remember correctly, you're only an outcast." Sasuke sneered cruelly, he had to find some way of getting rid of his frustration and it seems easiest to aim the anger at Naruto.

Naruto turned around to glare at Sasuke icily, "What do you suggest, then? Oh great and powerful Uchiha-san?"

Sasuke immediately became extremely angry. No body, **NO BODY INSULTS THE UCHIHA NAME IS MY PRESENCE!!!**

Sakura, seeing the tension building between the boys, decided to intervene. "Sasuke-kun, you know Naruto doesn't mean that! And Naruto, apologies to Sasuke-kun immediately! You have no right to

talk like that to Sasuke-kun!!" Sakura shouted at the blonde boy, hoping he would step down from the challenge. But to her surprise, Naruto only turned his icy gaze back at her.

"You have no right to call yourself a Shinobi." Sakura blinked in shock at his announcement and was about to rebuff when he interrupted again. "You have been nothing but a burden on your teacher and classmates. You have done nothing to earn the title of Shinobi. Until you earn the right to bare that title, you are nothing, Haruno-san. Nothing but a waste of space and time." With that said, Naruto quickly turned around and stormed away with his clones and Kakashi trailing behind him.

Sakura stood completely still as Naruto's harsh words slammed into her reality. Nothing but a waste of space and time?...Sakura felt herself falling into depression after she realized that Naruto was right. His words struck true. What have I ever done for the good of the team... nothing...She was snapped out of her musings when Tazuna-san suggested that they all follow Naruto's example and leave, which they did.

However, the same thoughts went through both Sasuke and Sakura's minds at the exact moment while they continued travelling to Tazuna-san's home in the Wave country. I have to become stronger.

Finally, they've reached the relative safety of Tazuna-san's own home. There, they met Tsunami, Tazuna-san's daughter and had Kakashi laid down to rest. However, the tension was still high in the air and everyone realized that even though they've won one battle, they haven't won the war. They all understood that Zabuza and his assistant, the Mist boy, were still out there, ready to kill them at any time. And with Kakashi out of battle for some time due to his exhausted body, everyone was worried about their future.

Kakashi sighed loudly to get his student's attention; it had been a few minutes since his awakening. Knowing he couldn't fight for

another week at the minimum, Kakashi understood that he will need the kids to do some of the upcoming battle for him. Even though he was very reluctant to do so, but sometimes you have to do things you don't like. However, he was also very aware that Sasuke and Sakura were not yet ready for these types of demanding battles without at least some intensive training. That idea basically left everything on Naruto's shoulders. Kakashi does not know exactly how strong Naruto really is, but if he had to harbour a guess, Naruto was probably as strong as a jounin level now. So decision made, the hard part was to actually convince Naruto, Kakashi sighed again. This is going to be hard.

"Naruto." Kakashi called.

"What?" Snapped the irritated Naruto sitting by the window.

"Can you do me a big favour?" Kakashi asked reluctantly.

"... depends on what this favour entails..." Kakashi mentally rolled his eyes. Motivating Naruto to do anything is like trying to push a herd of elephants away from their favourite water source. Very difficult.

"I need you to train Sasuke and Sakura for me." *That* comment earned him three full death glares. Naruto glared at Kakashi - as if he would ever want to train these pathetic kids. Sasuke glared at Kakashi - he refuses to **need** this upstart dobe's help in training him, not to mention he'd rather die than ask for *his* help anyway. Sakura glared at Kakashi - their teamwork was already strained enough as it is with an unmotivated Naruto and a slightly selfish Sasuke, to ask Naruto to teach them would be like asking a bird to teach a frog how to fly, it just wasn't probable.

But being the logical kid she is, Sakura tried to curb the anger in the room away with some reasoning. "But Sensei, what is a little training going to do?! Our enemy is a ninja *you* struggled against even with the Sharingan!!" (1) She persuaded.

"Sakura, when I was in trouble, it was you guys who came to my rescue and protected Tazuna-san from harm. I have great expectations for all three of you. You all have such high potential. Not to mention, I believe that Naruto here, (indicating Naruto with his eyes and Naruto scoffed at the attempt to pinpoint him) is *just* as capable of fighting Zabuza if he really wanted to." Kakashi said evenly.

The rest of the house's inhabitants instantly shifted their gaze on the seemingly shortest kid in the lot, but Naruto turned away from their attention and ignored them.

Kakashi sighed and tried again. "Naruto. You know you're the only one that can teach them right now. There isn't much I can do until I've recovered and unless you want your own team-mates to die, please just teach them some basics so that they could defend themselves." And for the final motivational push. "Your father would have wanted you to do this." Kakashi added lightly.

Naruto swivelled around immediately and glared at Kakashi full force; his voice was icy cold with rage. "That's blackmail and manipulation, Kakashi."

Kakashi nodded in reply but continued with his reasoning. "Yes, it is called manipulation but it is also the truth." He looked at Naruto evenly, trying to will the child into understanding how important this task actually was. Soon enough however, Naruto turned around again showing his tense back as he contemplated whether he should agree or not.

A long silence ensued after that, until Naruto broke it with his final statement on this matter. "Fine. Meet me at the woods south of here at 5 in the morning."

Naruto was about to get up and leave the room when he was interrupted by another voice. "No amount of training will help you guys. You're all going to die. There's no way you can win against Gatou."(2) A whining voice complained from the sidelines.

These statements came from a small child, no older than 8 or so. He was later introduced as Inari, Tazuna's grandson and Tsunami's son. Naruto gazed at the boy evenly, then turned around again and proceeded to leave the house. Just before he left though, he told the child: "Only a coward gives up hope when there is still a chance to win." And he left.

Naruto needed some peace and quiet while he thought about what to do tomorrow, so he entered the woodland area south of the house. But his musings were interrupted.

"You know, Inari doesn't really mean what he said. I'm apologizing on his behalf."

"You shouldn't be out here, old man. It's not safe." Naruto didn't turn around but his voice addressed the old bridge builder, which was enough for now.

"I know, but you'll protect me anyway, right? So there isn't any threat. And anyway, if I feel threatened in my very own home, then there really is no place safer, right?" Tazuna-san said in amusement, but in a very hollow and cynical sense.

"I guess" Naruto reluctantly replied back.

"Hey. I don't mean to intrude or anything... but I'd just like to know ya a little more, you know. Get to become friends and stuff." The old man continued, shifting nervously. "So ah.. , what do you say to some sake and stuff, huh?"

Naruto smiled slightly, though he still didn't turn around. "I'm not old enough to drink, old man." He answered, slightly amused.

Tazuna chuckled. "Heh. I forgot that you guys are only twelve, ne. Guess I'll have to save up the sake for another eight years at the very least, hn?" (3)

"Thanks." Naruto answered quietly, and finally, decided to turn around and greet his guest properly. Once turned, Tazuna was surprised at the slight smile that graced Naruto's face. In the few days that he had travelled with the young lad, he had never seen Naruto smile. He looked... well... younger when he wasn't scowling at someone or just generally annoyed. The Naruto presented to him right now, showed him how truly young he must really be. Still a child and yet so powerful. I wonder what he had been through to become the way he is now. Tazuna thought to himself.

Tazuna was about to start another conversation when Naruto beat him to the punch. "You don't have to worry about me being out here alone. I'm use to it already. Tonight, I'm going to be standing guard around the house and in the surrounding bush lands to make sure no assassins come this way. Don't worry about me. I've done this hundreds of time in the past so it's really not that difficult for me. I'll be back for breakfast tomorrow and I'll pick you up and protect you on the bridge work as well."

Wow. Seems the kid has got everything figured out already. But I still feel sorry that everything has been dumped on his shoulders so suddenly. It ain't fair for a kid like him to not smile often. As Tazuna thought over what Naruto had just said, he came to a conclusion. Done this hundreds of time before? How the kid gets himself into these types of situations? Doesn't seem like his teammates are anywhere near his level of expertise, so they couldn't have been together long. Damn, I'm starting to feel really sorry for the kid.

As if reading his mind, Naruto interrupted his thoughts again. "What happened in the past already happened, and there is nothing we can do to change it. So just let it go. I've got a busy day tomorrow so if it wouldn't be to rude to ask, could you please return to the premises, sir?" Though sounding like a command, the smirk on Naruto's face indicated his amusement and emphasized the fact that he was being sarcastic.

Tazuna gave in, sighed and nodded, then left the boy alone in the woods. Behind him, Naruto lost his smile. Why do I always push

people away? Am I so afraid of being hurt again that I'd rather live alone and without human contact at all? He thought to himself depressingly.

I.....don't know....

(1) Same thing as what Sakura said in Book 2, chapter 17.

(2) Very similar to what Inari said in Book 2, chapter 17.

(3) Um. I'm not very sure at what age Japanese people are allowed to drink alcohol, but if my memory serves me right, then Naruto should be 20 before he can taste alcohol. Strange, isn't it? Other places allow people to drink at 18 or so.

Um... sorry about the crappy ending. And I apologise for the psycho reaction Naruto has to the demon brothers. The incident will be explained as well as the rest of the special "Training" schedule in the upcoming chapter. I hope you like my little insight into Naruto's insecurities. Yes, he is strong, both mentally and physically, but he does have his own weaknesses, and that, my friends, is TRUST.

I'm working as fast as I possible can people, and I'm currently neglecting my other story as well, so feel very privileged. nn I'm really desperate for a beta so if anyone is interested, email me (shella [the At symbol] iinet.net.au). I really have tried my best to fix up the tenses but as you can see, I CAN'T do it alone because most of the time, I don't even pick the errors up. Please. Help needed and you also get to the read the Chapter first.

Okay, once again. Your reviews are required to help keep pushing me.

Chapter 4

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeare

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test.

Reply to my wonderful reviewers:

Hitomi No Ryu: You're right. It is not assassination; it is murder. I'll try to remember that and put it in here from now on. Thank you for your reviews.

Ookima: I'm writing! I'm writing! I guess Naruto would probably turn out this way without someone acknowledges him. My aim is actually to portray a Naruto that did not and could not get the acknowledgement from someone he really admired and or hoped for, namely his father (who of course is already dead), so Naruto is trying to find a way to reconcile with the fact that He bares the entity that killed his father. It's kinda ironic, ne?

Freakin' Knight in Training: I don't like bragging, so I will most definitely not make Naruto brag about his abilities. Hinata is very insecure in nature, but don't worry about Naruto's problems, once he finds himself making more friends, he looses some of his insecurities. His main problem is that he's not use to so many people he doesn't know about and doesn't trust them completely either. Once they earn his trust, he'll be his cheery little self again. I didn't want Naruto to start off being an arrogant prick or a completely weak boy, just someone who knows what they want to do in life but unsure how to get there.

Hmr: Longer, huh? I'll try but it completely depends on my muse, ne

SilverKnight7: I'll only be giving summaries of Sasuke's and Sakura's trainings but I really wanted them to grow a bit before they fight against Haku. And I also didn't want Sakura to become just a spectator in the fight, so I made her a lot stronger mentally and physically. Hope you like!

Ani1: Thank you for your compliments! It's not easy trying to depict the atmosphere and feelings of characters without stating out the obvious, but I try to do my best.

Emotwo: I'm trying to add some original scenes without corrupting the original plot lines, because I really do respect Kishimoto's original story line. However, I do like to twist the plot a lot to accommodate this new Naruto and have things turn slightly upside down and give an interesting perspective. Thank you for your review. And trust me, I'll be adding a lot of personalised scenes once they return to Konoha.

Judiann: Really?! They don't have any drinking age prohibition. Wow! Oo;; I'll keep that in mind when (and if) I go to Japan. Thank you.

Babowonsuni: Thank you for your review!

Wormkaizer: I'll do my very best. Thank you!

Jonathan Shim: I might just make Naruto leave Kakashi's command temporarily. He'll probably be doing his own thing, as to what that is, I'm not sure yet, but I'll think of something. Thank you!

Akira: Updating! Updating

Licht Sieger: Thank you for your continual support! I really appreciate it.

Zekkyu: "Reason to trust". It's got a nice ring to it and it does fit the theme for now. But later on, when Naruto becomes a lot more trustful of his companions, I think the title might deteriorate a bit. But thank you for the suggestion anyway!

Sirus183: I'm hurrying! I'm hurrying! Keep your pants on!

Fredrik: Not sure about the pairings yet, if there is any. And even if I do, it'll take quite a while to establish. As you already know, Naruto has some serious trust issues, so if he ever did get with someone, he's gonna have to trust that someone a lot. And don't worry! This someone WON'T be Sakura

RuByMoOn17: Thank you! This chapter doesn't have much fighting but the next one will be completely fighting. Have fun!

Pyr00tje: I'm updating now. Isn't that fast?! But don't expect the next one out too soon, because I haven't even started that one. I got this one out because I wanted to put out two chapters close together. Well, be patient and the next chapter will definitely be worth your while.

X2DarkLord: Yeah! Someone will to be my beta-reader!!! I'll email you soon. K? I will most definitely screw up my tenses in the next chapter because it's practically completely fighting. Thank you soooooo much for volunteering! And if you're willing, could you just copy and have a look at my other chapters already online, I've been told my grammar sucks in those. ;; I was rushing though. :P

Ccslover: Sorry to yaoi readers, but I don't think SasuNaru will work in this story either. They'll probably end up as good friends who support one another, but they'll never develop further than that, because both their dark sides will clash to much. Hope you're happy with that.

DarkDemonMaster: Thank you for your review and your support. Yeah, it's the same with me, when I write, I don't pick up on

Grammar consciously and most of time just skip it. Which isn't good when (and if) I ever write stories as part as my job.

Midnight Fairy: Yeah. I put Sakura in Naruto's old place because I really wanted her to know that becoming stronger is NOT easy and you have to try hard to get anywhere. In the manga, she struck me as the kind of girl that expects things to go right for her without her trying so I'm going to force her into this situation. Thank you very much for your continual reviews though! I really appreciates them!

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. This story has a darker version of Naruto; he is very cynical, cold and somewhat rude. Um.. This chapter will be a LOT slower than the other 2 and prologue. I wanted to concentrate on characterisation, not only on Naruto but also on Sakura and Sasuke. Focusing on how they slowly start to respect, trust and even depend on each other. In this chapter, Naruto will become slightly nicer to Sakura and Sasuke, so all you fans out there better cheer! There will be MANY similarities between the dialogue in the manga and the dialogue here.

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed"

Chapter 3

Early the next morning, both Sakura and Sasuke arrived at the woodland area that Naruto had instructed them to go to yesterday, to receive their supposed training. It had taken Kakashi a whole night of persuading, but in the end, they had finally agreed that there really was no choice in the matter. If they had to fight against Zabuza and his apprentice again, they would need to become stronger fast. And the quickest way currently, was to learn from Naruto. Both of the genins were a bit nervous about the prospect to start off with, but they were also determined to get stronger.

Finding Naruto leaning against a tree waiting for them, Sakura and Sasuke stood in rigid stances, apprehensive about what Naruto would be teaching them. Naruto raised his eyebrows and looked at his *pupils* steadily, analysing their reactions. After a while, he sighed and rubbed the back of his head with a look of irritation on his face. He really didn't want to do this... but he didn't want them to die either. Standing up straighter, Naruto gazed at both Sasuke's slightly annoyed expression and Sakura's nervous one.

"For today, we will be doing the tree climbing exercise." Naruto lectured as if he was talking to some 5 year olds.

Sasuke lifted a delicate eyebrow in reaction. "You're kidding right? Climbing trees?" He looked at Naruto as if he expected Naruto to grow a second head.

"Yes, Sasuke." Naruto hissed between clenched teeth. He really didn't want to put up with Sasuke's attitude problem at the ungodly hour of 5 in the morning. "I did say *TREECLIMBING* , but this exercise is slightly different from what you are thinking about."

Sakura blinked in confusion and ask. "Then what kind of... (Trying to find a better term but failed) *tree-climbing* is it?"

"Climbing trees without the use of hands." Naruto said and then started to demonstrate. Action speaks louder than words anyway, so action it is. Doing a simple hand seal, Naruto concentrated, pushing the right amount of Chakra onto the bottom of his feet. He then started walking up a tree nonchalantly as if he was strolling through a park. Sasuke's eyes widened slightly at the unnatural display and Sakura's mouth hanged open.

Heh. If they think this was hard, try doing this on a cliff edge! Naruto silently complained, since that was exactly what he had to do when he was training with Jiraiya. That sadistic bastard! He was, at the time, thrown off a cliff, just for the fun of it. Naruto really hated cliffs. His first encounter with them happened when he had to perform the Kuchiyose no jutsu and have Gamabunta jump out of the cliff to save

his life. Since then, he'd had nothing but bad experiences when dealing with cliffs. With this climbing exercise, he was (once again) thrown off a cliff edge, and was expected to climb his way out, using only his feet. That is, if he didn't die when he reached the ground in the first place. That bastard of a teacher... But I did pay him back pretty good! (Naruto smirked silently) Jiraiya's hair had stayed a permanent pink colour for months later.

Back to the present, Naruto finished his demonstration by ending up standing upside down from a thick branch protruding from the tree. "This is how you climb a tree without hands." Naruto waited for his stunned students to recover before he continued. "Now it's your turn. Gather Chakra around the bottom of your feet and climb a tree."

"Wait a minute! How does learning how to climb trees suppose to help us become stronger?" Sakura asked. Though nervous of Naruto's reactions, she really did want some answers and was willing to get scolded for that. She had always been an inquiring child, always curious as to how things worked and why. So to her, it felt very much like the Academy days again, where she would raise her hand and hope the teacher answered her question instead of telling her to be quiet.

However, Naruto was not one of those patient teachers working in the Academy. He sighed again. Why must they be so bothersome!"I'm assuming that both of you know how to channel Chakra right?!" At their confused nods, he continued. "This exercise is to teach you how to *control* your Chakra *properly* , without wasting it! It forces you to bring out the exact amount of Chakra to the exact position on your body, which in turns, help build up your stamina so that you can continue fighting for a lot longer. And also, (theoretically) if you can learn this precise control, you should be able to master any jutsu."

Seeing that they had nothing else to add, Naruto picked up two kunais from his hidden pouch and threw them to the ground, directly in front of Sasuke and Sakura. "Use those kunais to mark how high you can make it up a tree before you are no longer able to control

yourself. This is an exercise that is learnt through trial and error so I expect the two of you to help each other out when you need to. That's all. Firstly, show me how much control you already have."

Both Sakura and Sasuke did exactly as they were told. They've already had discussions with one another before hand about this, and agreed that they were willing to give Naruto the benefit of the doubt for now, because they really didn't know exactly how difficult the training session actually was. Sasuke concentrated on putting the correct amount of Chakra on his feet. He ran towards one tree, jumped off the ground, took three steps up said tree, but immediately felt his feet cracking against the trees bark. Marking his progress, Sasuke then jumped down safely. Damn. This is harder than it looks!Sasuke cursed under his breath.

"Hey. This is actually pretty easy." Both boys looked towards Sakura in shock. She had figured it out almost immediately!The same thought went through both boys' mind. Damn, it took me a full week to be able to reach the top!complained Naruto, slightly jealous at Sakura's natural ability to control her Chakra well. Then again, she didn't have a demon sealed inside of her.Naruto thought in excuse.

"It seems like Sakura is the first one able to control Chakra precisely." This comment was aimed directly at Sasuke's pride. It deserves to be wounded a bit; if only to push him to his limits.Naruto thought to himself. "Alright, continue until you are completely worn out. I want to see how long your stamina can last."

After only 10 minutes of watching Sakura go up and down a tree, she collapsed in exhaustion. Damn, her body's Chakra amount is so small it's practically uselessNaruto thought disappointingly. Then he looked towards Sasuke's progress. Though not as good as Sakura's handling of Chakra, he certainly has a lot of more Chakra reserves to spare! Damn, I'm going to have to leave them to train alone and do my guard duty over Tazuna soon.Naruto thought, looking at the rising sun.

"Sakura." Naruto called as he jumps down from his upside down perch, which he had never really left since his demonstration. Sakura looked up at him in surprise, wondering what he wanted.

After Naruto lands lightly on the ground, he stood straight up and looked over Sakura's exhausted body with a critical eye. No. This will most definitely not do..."Sakura, your control over Chakra is almost perfect. But your greatest weakness lies in your limited Chakra reserve. You need to build up a lot more stamina if you wish to fully participate in any battle." He stated firmly.

Sakura nodded in silent reply. She knew that she was the weakest in the group, but didn't know how else to change that fact. She just didn't have enough Chakra to do practically anything other than the basic stuff you learn in the Academy. "How can I build up my Chakra reserves then? Naruto...kun." Even Sakura had to admit that the training wasn't as bad as she'd feared. And being able to do something useful for once really did help her self-confidence. She really does want to help the others in battle - and to do that, she had to become stronger.

Naruto sighed, shaking his head a bit but decided to tell her the truth. "It requires intensive Taijutsu training. Once you build up enough physical stamina, you're spiritual stamina will also increase automatically. But I won't lie to you, Sakura. To do that in such a small amount of time, will require seriously intensive physical exercises."

Sakura shivered a bit at the explanation. Am I ready for that? I ... don't know...But looking back at Naruto's determined eyes, Sakura finally made a decision. I won't be left behind. Sasuke-kun will master how he controls Chakra soon and then... I'll be the only one that can't participate in any battles. I don't want that. I need to become stronger. With that mental preparation, Sakura nodded in acceptance. "I understand. And I'm willing to do what ever it takes."

Naruto nodded back in satisfaction, and smiled gently at her, proud of her dedication and courage. He then turned around to address

Sasuke and his Chakra exercise, leaving Sakura to get some more rest before he puts her through intensive training.

Unbeknownst to him, when he had turned, Sakura's eyes had widened in surprise. That was the first time he had ever smiled in her presence, in the entire time that she had known him as a teammate. He... looks younger... when he finally smiles. Sakura thought, though nowhere as sexy as Sasuke-kun's smile (if he ever did smile naturally and not that smirk). Naruto's smile was genuine. It wasn't faked and it was most definitely not forced. Sakura made a silent promise to herself then, she wants to improve the relationship between the members of team 7 so that they will never feel so isolated again, especially Naruto. She really wanted all three of them to work as a team.

"Sasuke." Called Naruto. Sasuke looked up at Naruto from his resting on the ground. He was currently breathing heavily with slight exhaustion. He had reached half way up the tree, though he was still disappointed that Sakura could be better than him in that respect.

Naruto decided to give him some tips. He may not like Sasuke Uchiha very much, but he didn't want the kid to die just because of his own incompetence. It would be a waste for the sole survivor of the Uchiha tragedy to die in such a dishonourable way. "Listen Sasuke. Chakra uses Spiritual energy as well as Physical energy, so you can't get too excited. To gather Chakra on your feet, you have to relax and focus on the tree. Don't give in to your frustrations or anger, if you do, you will never improve."

"I know that." Snapped an irritated Sasuke. He did know all that but it was still difficult for him to concentrate. With the added pressure knowing that Sakura had already reached the top and Naruto was way out of his league, Sasuke was starting to feel slightly inferior to his two-team mates and this thought was not helping his mood.

Naruto silently seethed. I'm trying to help you, you bastard prick... Taking a deep breath, Naruto forcefully calmed himself down enough to continue with his tip. Even without Sasuke's outwardly

acceptance, he still had to help the kid because he had already agreed to it. And by god, Naruto Uzumaki does not go back on his words.

"Your biggest problem, Sasuke, is your superiority complex! Can't you just accept that people are different? You cannot compare people and state that one is stronger than another simply because they each have their own strengths and weaknesses. What gives a man true strength is his *will* to face a seemingly impossible conflict and deal with it! Using anger and hate to fuel your power will bring you nothing but suffering, and believe me, I *know* that pain very well. If you give in to your darkness, you will become nothing but a murdering monster... You won't even be human." Naruto exclaimed, exasperated with the infuriating boy.

Sasuke glared at Naruto full force. His anger wasn't just due to the fact that Naruto had insulted him directly and without pause, it was also because Naruto had hit a little bit too close to home with his words. Yes, he had been using hate and anger to fuel his ambition to kill his brother. But who gave Naruto the right to tell him what to do with his life? How dare Naruto tell him what he was doing is wrong! But with every word that escaped Naruto's lips, Sasuke knew they were all true. Deep inside of him, the small child that he once was, shivered in fright as the cruel words bombarded against his thin protective shield.

In the present, before Sasuke could snarl back in automatic response, Sakura butted in, trying to calm the storm before it explodes. "GUYS!! STOP IT!! WE'RE SUPPOSE TO WORK AS A TEAM HERE!! A **TEAM** !!! THAT MEANS THAT WE HELP EACH OTHER, NOT TRY TO KILL EACH OTHER!!! Please... please stop arguing."

Both Naruto and Sasuke had stopped talking when Sakura butted into the conversation, but they were still standing rigidly, and the tension in the air was still high. Sighing, Sakura understood that it was up to her to keep her team together. No matter what it takes, she won't let them be isolated again.

"Sasuke-kun, please just listen to Naruto for once. Just because I can control my own Chakra slightly better than you doesn't mean anything. It might be because I have so little Chakra to control in the first place, and I don't have any special bloodline abilities either. So there really isn't any comparison at all." Turning to Naruto, Sakura continued her reasoning. "And Naruto-kun, can you please be a little bit more patient with us. We're not like you; we don't know all these things and are just starting to grasp the concepts of them. I know that we don't have time, but we are doing the best we can." Sakura explained softly.

A long silence ensures but Naruto finally decided to break the ice. "I... apologise, Sakura-san, Sasuke-kun. I'm... not use to travelling with a group. And to rebuff your suggestion Sakura, I too, took a very long time to master all these things, so I know what you guys are going through. However, since I *am new* at this... *teaching* (cursing Kakashi mentally), I'll try to be a bit more lenient, but I also expect you two to give it your all."

Now, it was both Naruto and Sakura's turn in waiting for Sasuke's reply. It took a while but Sasuke finally beat his own stubbornness into submission and stated a short: "Sorry. I'll try harder." Naruto sighed, knowing that Sasuke won't be changing his attitude and way of life anytime soon. Oh well, at least we're not at each other's necks anymore.

Looking up at the sun, Naruto realized that a lot of time had flown by, almost an hour had passed since the beginning of the training and he still had to get back to guard over Tazuna. Giving Sasuke an even look, Naruto surrendered. "Fine, Sasuke. Return to what you were doing before. And when you are able to go up and down the trees easily for close to one full hour without stressing, I'll start teaching you jutsus and stuff." Both Sasuke's eyes widened in surprise. Naruto is going to teach me jutsus?!

Naruto turned around then and left Sasuke to his own exercises. He walked towards Sakura, whom had just recovered from her previous exhaustion. Okay, now what to do with Sakura. A light bulb went up in

Naruto's head and he immediately changed direction, walking towards his backpack (of which he had brought with him the night before into the forest). He took out two worn looking, long, common grey cloths.

"Sakura, come over here." Sakura did as she was told. "Tie these cloths around your fingers and palm like a bandage." Once again, Sakura followed his instructions word for word but didn't understand the reason behind these actions. Noting Sakura's confusion, Naruto explained. "For today only, I'll give you some simple exercises that will test your physical body and tire you out but won't hurt you much. First, I'll expect you to do at least 100 push-ups by the end of the day. I don't care how many breaks you take as long as that 100 push-ups is reached. And another thing, to improve the power of your punches, I want you to continuously punch this tree (indicating the big tree behind him) until you leave a dent at least half an inch thick into the tree. The cloths are to protect your knuckles and fingers from bruising too much."

Sakura's eyes widened at Naruto's order. 100 push ups will probably make her completely exhausted and then she still had to punch a *tree* !? Opening her mouth to complain about the difficulty of the second command, she was cut off as Naruto grinned at her and slammed his open palm onto another tree just next to him. The sudden impact sent slight shockwaves into the ground and plenty of leaves started falling from said tree. When Naruto finally removed his hand, a finely detailed handprint was revealed on the surface of the tree, it had a dent one inch deep from the surrounding bark. Both Sakura and Sasuke underwent shock at Naruto's show of power. There was absolutely no Chakra involved in that slam.

Naruto stood relaxed in front of his pupils as they try to recover from their surprise. Eventually, he grew tired of their silence. "Well, that's it for today. I've got to go protect Tazuna-san while he works on the bridge. The two of you stay here and train. You may return to the house for lunch, dinner and snacks if you are too tired. That's all. If you guys have improved sufficiently enough within the week then I

might consider teaching you new stuff. But don't expect to learn them too fast."

With that said, he left his teammates in the woodland and left on his mission. Reaching the house, he made a small greeting to Tazuna, Tsunami and Kakashi, ignoring the irritable brat sitting by the table. He had his late breakfast and was off with Tazuna-san to work.

Standing guard all day was *incredibly* boring. Naruto had created several clones to guard the place from all corners. But since nothing was actually happening, Naruto almost fell asleep while on his post. He woke up abruptly due to some commotion between the builders. It seemed one of them chickened out and didn't want to take the risk of his life, and so he wanted to quit. Heh, cowards. Thought Naruto. But as he studied the man's face more clearly, as well as the expression on Tazuna-san's face, he realized something. They're scared. Not just for their lives, but also for old man Tazuna too. They're worried about him. But Tazuna-san was determined to bring hope back into the Wave country residents by finishing this bridge, no matter what they said, he refused to give in.

Is that what my father was like? wondered Naruto for no particular reason. He knew that the cost might be too high but still determined to continue on. Refusing to give in to the fear but resigned that others may not feel the same. Naruto sighed and shook his head to clear his mind. He really didn't need to think about this right now.

After Tazuna-san had finished his shift with bridge building, the two of them decided to walk down the streets of the Wave country, going grocery shopping. Naruto was very surprised at the number of people walking around holding signs that say they would willingly take any job available. Yes, he had been to the Wave country before but it wasn't like this back then. Then again, the last time he had been here, it was several years ago, Gatou had not shown his head back then.

Walking into the grocery shop, Naruto became even more depressed as he looked at the range of rotten vegetables and its limited number. All the children outside would starve. Naruto thought depressingly. However, in that moment, he felt someone trying to get close to him. A thief. Not wanting to cause a scene, Naruto turned around quickly and sent a glare at the would-be thief. The thief became scared under the scrutiny of Naruto's deadly glare, and ran away.

Walking back to Tazuna-san's home, they were stopped again by a small-orphaned girl, to which, Naruto gave her his entire pack of energy bars. He wasn't a child anymore and didn't carry candies, but the Ninja energy bars would most definitely sustain the child and her friends for a few days at the very least. Tazuna-san then took the opportunity to explain their country's hopeless situation and that the only hope left was to complete that bridge.

Hope. Naruto thought. Hope is the strongest of all human emotion.

It was that night, during dinner, that Naruto felt slightly different from what he usually felt in the midst of strangers. For most of his life, the only person he would ever willingly sit next to while eating was the pervert Sennin himself. Naruto may not admit it, but the murder attempt on his life while he was 6 had permanently scarred him psychologically. He doesn't trust people enough to sit next to them and eat, especially strangers. Most of the time, he would order food, then find some place else to sit and eat in silence. This was probably the first time he had ever eaten food with so many people before, Iruka not included of course.

Naruto found it to be a surprisingly pleasant feeling. He relaxed in the company and continued to eat his food slowly and silently, while watching Sasuke and Sakura chow their food down, eating slightly more than usual. Once they both finished with their first bowl, they asked for seconds. Kakashi wondered at that and decided to ask. "Sasuke, Sakura. What's gotten into you two? You usually don't eat so much."

"No, we have to eat." Said Sasuke punctually. Smirking slightly at the dumfounded expression on Kakashi's face.

"We're gonna need a lot of energy to continue the training so we'll need all the nutrients we can get, Kakashi-sensei." Added Sakura proudly. Though completely bruised from head to toe, Sakura seem to be in an incredibly good mood.

Both Kakashi and Naruto nodded in acceptance, feeling quite proud that Sasuke and Sakura were getting along so well and were probably improving a lot too.

After dinner, it was Sakura that asked about the picture on the wall. Unbeknownst to her, the tension in the room heightened slightly. The statements that follow led to Inari's subsequent leaving of the table and made the rest of the Ninja group curious. Well, Naruto was curious but not bad enough to stick his head into other people's business.

After Tazuna-san's sad story of Inari's father, the room fell into complete silence. Naruto was the first to move, he stepped confidently towards the door. But before Kakashi could ask him what he was doing, Naruto answered back: "I'm keeping watch tonight as well. So the rest of you can go to sleep without worry. I'll expect Sakura and Sasuke tomorrow morning, same time, same place." And with that said, he left.

Several days passed in this fashion. Starting from 5 in the morning, Naruto would instruct Sasuke and Sakura what they would be doing for the rest of the day. By 7, Naruto would leave with Tazuna-san to work and guard him there. After work, they would go grocery shopping and return home to rest. After dinner, Naruto would instruct Sakura and Sasuke to rest plenty because the next day would be even harder. And then he would leave to do his watch of night duty.

For a weak, this went on, but by the end of the week, everyone had become slightly worried over Naruto's health. Yes, he did finish his

breakfast, lunch and dinner, but he hadn't been getting enough sleep and the dark shadows around his eyes are proof of that. Even Sasuke was starting to be slightly concerned over his droopy-eyed expression.

Kakashi had asked Naruto (or ordered him) to rest for a while and let the other two take over or just simply stop doing the night duties, but Naruto had vehemently refused. His argument back was that "Now would be the perfect time for the enemy to attack because Zabuza would be close to full recovery. Not to mention that he had made a promise and he always kept his promises."

Kakashi almost regretted the fact that he had conned Naruto into this situation and was forced into reluctantly agree to let the teen do as he pleased. The only thing Kakashi and the other two genins could do now, was to try and get stronger or better as soon as possible to relieve Naruto of his burden.

Time passed. Kakashi was slowly recovering, and both Sakura and Sasuke had improved tremendously. After the first five days of either practicing tree climbing or physical training, both were given the opportunity to learn something new. Naruto opted to teach them how to enhance normal weapons such as a kunai with Chakra.

[FLASHBACK]

"Okay, listen up. Sasuke, since you've got more Chakra in reserve and your aim is already pretty good, I'll be teaching you how to enhance the power of a kunai using Chakra. And Sakura, since you are better at controlling the Chakra flow, I'll be teaching you how to enhance the control over the direction of the kunai using Chakra. The concept may be the same but the end result is completely different."

Here, he demonstrated the effects of each. First, Naruto threw a normal kunai at a tree and it embedded itself into the tree like normal. Next, he enhanced another kunai with Chakra and threw that at the same tree. This kunai's power had been enhanced and so, it

easily smashed its way right through the tree's thick trunk completely.

"That's the difference between a normal kunai and a Chakra enhanced kunai for power." Naruto looked back at his stunned students.

But he did not pause to let the information sink in. Naruto performed a seal quickly and formed a Bunshin. When he threw a normal kunai towards his very own clone, the clone dodged out of the way easily missing the kunai by a mile. Next, he showed them the same kunai, enhancing it with Chakra and threw it once again at the clone. The clone jumped away to miss the kunai but the kunai suddenly changed direction in mid air and flies back towards the clone again. The clone managed to dodge against the kunai several times until it ran out of room to dodge and became lodged in the back with said kunai, disappearing into a cloud of smoke.

"And that is the difference between a normal kunai and a kunai enhance with Chakra for control. It's also called the "Chakra seeking kunai", because it follows the opponent until it is embedded into something with a high amount of Chakra, or you can direct it with your own Chakra using manipulation techniques." Naruto concluded his demonstration.

[END FLASHBACK]

It had taken the two several more days but they've finally managed to learn those techniques as well. As expected, Sasuke had taken to the power enhanced kunais more while Sakura always prefer the enhanced control over the movement of the kunai, instead of the power it exerts.

After those practices, Naruto had also taught them some useful but low level jutsu that aren't very well known. These jutsu do not take up much Chakra and can be used easily like the basic Academy jutsus.

Sakura was taught how to disguise herself with invisibility Genjutsu as well as how to create illusionary bunshins to trick the opponent into thinking that they were real Kage bunshins. Both these tricks do not use up much Chakra so Sakura was able to perfect them easily.

Sasuke, on the other hand, opted for more offensive jutsus. He had learnt Naruto's own original jutsu called "RaiKan Mahi no jutsu" (Lightning shock paralysis), which when used in conjunction with Taijutsu was very deadly and effective. Basically, Chakra is forced into the palm of the user's hands and then converted into electricity. When used in hand to hand combat, anywhere the user touches his opponent with his Chakra infused hands, the opponent will be shocked with a burst of lightning and will be paralysed for a time, enabling the user to finish him off easily. The longer the user has a hold on his opponent, the longer and more painful the shock and paralysis.

After that, Naruto asked them to find some time to spar against one another. Their different styles complemented each other. Sakura would usually be defensive and used tricks to get around her opponent. Sasuke, being physically stronger, prefers to use all out hand-to-hand combat skills and be more offensive. The two of them had learnt, in a very short time, how to work as an efficient team. However, because, for most of the time, Naruto wasn't with them, their teamwork with the blonde was still slightly strained but they've all learnt how to respect and trust each other through out the training period.

Finally, one day almost two weeks after their fight with Zabuza, Naruto was found sleeping, lying on the ground against a tree with his arms wrapped around his knees. This was the sight that greeted Haku, early in the morning as he went to pick the herbal weeds he needed.

Deciding he should wake the boy up even though Haku easily recognized Naruto as one of the leaf ninjas that had fought Zabuza-san, but he didn't want to fight right now. As Haku's hand reached

closer and closer towards a sleeping Naruto, he was completely surprised when Naruto's hand immediately snapped up and grabbed onto Haku's wrist tightly. It was then that Naruto started yawning widely while waking up groggily.

"Uhm..." Naruto looked up with blearily eyes at a stranger. "uh... who are you?"

Haku smiled gently. "I'm just a villager. I saw you sleeping here on this uncomfortable ground so I thought I would wake you."

Naruto realized he was still holding onto Haku's hand and immediately let go of it. Then, he gave another mouth splitting yawn and stretched his arms to the sides. Scratching his head sheepishly, Naruto grinned at the boy. "Sorry about that. It would actually be safer if you called me up from a distance away."

Haku blinked innocently but he also noticed the dark circles that surrounded Naruto's normally vibrant blue eyes. "You look really tired. Maybe you should just return to sleep. I won't bother you this time."

Naruto shook his head and smiled. "No thank you. I can't sleep now. I've still got some training to get done."

Haku looked at him curiously again, then made as if he only just recognized the ninja head protector. "You... that head protector...are you a ninja?"

Naruto tapped the head protector strapped around his head proudly. "Yep."

"Wow, you must be really strong." Haku said amazed.

Naruto shrugged nonchalantly and looked at the ground instead, as if ashamed. "I guess."

Haku blinked in confusion. "You don't seem very enthusiastic about being a ninja... Why?" He asked curiously.

Naruto shrugged helplessly again as he continued to focus on the ground and let the silence stretch. Haku had almost given up hope for any answer and started shifting around to gather the herbs he wanted. He was again shocked when he heard Naruto whisper.

"Do you... know... that sometimes... people are born with a destiny... that they don't like... and can't change?" (1)

Haku, with his back to Naruto, nodded in understanding, though was still slightly taken back and tense around the subject that Naruto was talking about currently.

"I'm one of those people. I... have a burden... in which only I carry and no one else. Because of that, I... can't trust people. I... don't let them get close. And then... I become lonely."

Again Haku nodded in understanding, still with his back to Naruto. This conversation is bringing back a whole shit load of bad memories. I thought I've put all of these memories behind me. Haku thought sadly as he tried to imagine what Naruto had gone through in his life.

"So... I decided to change myself. Now I'm a ninja. I have to become strong. And I have to find some answers." Concluded Naruto. (2)

Pipped with curiosity and intrigue, Haku asked: "Is it for your benefit or are you fighting for someone else?"

Another long silence ensued. "I don't know exactly. Sometimes, it's purely for me. But sometimes... I just don't want others to be hurt."

Taking a deep breath of courage, Haku turned around to face Naruto once again. He was surprised at the amount of sadness reflected in those lonely blue eyes. Taking another deep breath, he asked: "Do you have someone who is important to you?"

This time, it was Naruto's turn to look confused. Haku giggled at his expression and decided to elaborate. "When a person has something important to protect, that's when they can truly become strong."

Naruto took sometime to think about that statement. It's the same thing that Pervert Sennin said to me. Without looking at Haku, Naruto answered the original question. "I can understand... But I guess, I'm still looking for my most precious person... or.. in a way, my most precious person... is no longer within my reach." Father...

Haku nodded again, then stood up and started walking away, indicating that he had gathered enough herbs and needed to get going. "You will become strong. Let's meet again somewhere sometime."

"Yep!" Naruto called out after him.

"Oh.. and one more thing... I'm a boy." Haku smiled as he continued on his way.

"I know!" Naruto smirked behind him.

As Haku walked away, Sasuke came in the opposite direction and looked over Haku suspiciously but ignored it as a coincidence.

A few hours later, while Naruto has gone with Tazuna-san to the bridge, Kakashi decided to check up on his student's progress. He made his way towards the woodlands and followed the sounds of fighting that he could hear. Upon reaching the clearing that Naruto had used to teach Sasuke and Sakura, he was shocked at seeing his two students sparing against one another.

Sakura jumped from a perch on a tree, holding a kunai tightly in her hand. She then landed perfectly on top of Sasuke, whom also had a kunai in his hand. A high pitch sound resulted from the impact of the two kunais striking each other. Sasuke then pulled his full weight

against Sakura's kunai and since he was heavier, he was able to push Sakura off of him. Sakura jumped off gracefully, finishing a somersault in mid-air and landed onto the ground lightly.

Both then threw their kunais at each other. Sasuke decided to take a defensive stance while Sakura ran towards him in a charge. The kunai that Sasuke threw at Sakura was charged with Chakra increasing its power so when it struck against Sakura's kunai, it forced Sakura's kunai off course and continued on its journey towards Sakura. However, Sakura was too fast and she immediately stepped toward the side to avoid the kunai with her speed. Sasuke's kunai impacted onto the ground and a resulting explosion can be heard through out the woods, the crater of the impact was at least a meter wide.

Sasuke grunted at his missed opportunity but had to duck quickly to avoid Sakura's previous kunai, which was charged with Chakra to maintain control. The kunai changed direction again in mid air and heads back towards Sasuke, whom was doing his best to avoid the flying kunai. Ducking, dodging, sidestepping and jumping, Sasuke just managed to avoid the kunai each time. He became so focused on the kunai that he did not immediately see Sakura running towards him in high speed from his blind spot.

Sakura suddenly appeared beside Sasuke and punched him in the face with all her power behind it. Sasuke took the punch, but immediately formed a small set of seals afterwards, Chakra was then formed on his right hand and he struck her in the stomach with it while he was thrown back from the impact of her punch. Sakura, too, fell onto the ground due to Sasuke's attack, which led the two of them into a tie.

"Oy oy! Very good moves, Sakura! Impressive manoeuvring Sasuke!" Called Kakashi to his students as he clapped his hands in appreciation. However, he was curious about the seal that Sasuke had preformed against Sakura, because in all his years, Kakashi had never seen it before. "Sasuke. What jutsu is that? The one you just used." He asked.

"It's called RaiKan Mahi no jutsu. It changes Chakra into electricity and shocks the opponent while paralysing them." Sasuke answered breathlessly, his jaw still in pain due to Sakura's punch.

"I see." Kakashi nodded. Must be one of Naruto's original jutsus. Damn, wish I had my Sharingan on just then. Oh well. There'll be other opportunities.

Kakashi looked over his students and was highly impressed at how much they have grown. Just watching the previous fight, Kakashi was able to determine that both of them have improved on their speed and strength. Sasuke had also become exceptionally fast, almost as fast as Naruto (or as fast as the Naruto that had fought against Kakashi that first time, Kakashi was still unsure how fast or powerful Naruto actually is). Sakura too, had improved tremendously. Her petite little body had developed quite a lot of firm muscles around, indicating that she had been very hard at work doing physical exercises everyday. Not to mention they were both pretty good fighters now. Soon, they will be able to finally give Naruto the time to rest and sleep properly in a real bed as the three of them would take over all the night watches and day guards. Kakashi, himself had almost completely recovered.

That night, Naruto literally slumped onto the chair and table due to his fatigue. Even he had to admit those two weeks of hardly any sleep and continual watch and teaching duty was wearing him thin with exhaustion. The others, sitting around the dinner table, all looked at him with varying signs of worry in their eyes. Even though Sasuke and Sakura have been training hard but at least they received decent amounts of sleep and food everyday. Naruto wasn't even eating properly anymore due to his tiredness making him have no appetite for food.

The only occupant in the house that didn't look at Naruto in worry was Inari. He glared hatefully at Naruto from across the table as his mother served his food. Finally, without reason, Inari just couldn't take it anymore and decided he needed to shout at someone to

release his pent up frustration, anger and hurt. Naruto just so happen to become the lucky contestant to bare the blunt of it.

With tears leaking from his eyes, Inari shouted at Naruto. "Why do you guys bother to try so hard?! No matter how hard you train, you're still no match for Gatou's men!! No matter what glorious claim you make or how hard you work, when facing the strong, THE WEAK WILL ONLY END UP GETTING KILLED!!"

Everyone was shocked at Inari's sudden outburst, but Naruto just ignored it all and buried his head in his arms on the table. A softly spoken word was all his answer. "Whatever."

Inari's passionate shouts continued. "I'd hate to be like you!! You don't know anything about this country, yet you're being so nosy!! You are completely different from me!! You don't know how hard life can be!!"

Naruto's temper flared at the last sentence. He slammed his hand down onto the table so hard that the entire room reverberated with the shockwave; surprisingly the table was still intact after the impact. Naruto gazed steadily at the tearful Inari and said in a soft softly but icy voice. "So it's okay for you to pose as the star of a tragedy and cry all day? Then just keep on crying forever, you cry-baby." Inari's lips trembled at the coldness of his words. "I'm glad I'm not like you. Because if I were, I would have committed suicide a *long* time ago."

A long pause settled in the room, for no one else had anything to add, nor do they know how to cut the thick tension hanging in the air. Most of them (with the exception of Kakashi) didn't understand why Naruto had said what he said. Naruto continued with his argument in an icy tone. "Don't you *ever* tell *me* I don't know how hard life can be. Because I do know..." Inari's eyes widened slightly as Naruto's own eyes started turning slightly amethyst in colour. "And I accept it."

Finally finished with what he wanted to say, Naruto turned around abruptly and left the room, mumbling something about finally sleeping in a real bed. Kakashi had already spoken with him before

hand, stating that Naruto would stay at home for the next few days to get his strength up while the other three would take turns to do all the other duties.

Once Naruto had left, the silence continued. Kakashi, unable to contain the silence, broke it with his own assurances. "Inari." When the boy didn't look up, Kakashi decided to keep going anyway. "Naruto didn't mean any harm by what he said. It's probably just the stress that he's been under lately that has pushed him to say those words. Don't worry about it okay?" However, these words did little to alleviate the tension, everyone did eventually continued on with their meal, but in complete silence. Naruto didn't even touch his dinner, again.

That same night but much later, found Inari and Kakashi sitting outside in the docks together. Kakashi tried to find away to broach the subject at hand and decided to start with the obvious. "Tazuna-san told us about your father."

Seeing some reaction, Kakashi continued. "Like you, Naruto also grew up without a father. Actually, he's never known any of his parents and he's never even had a single friend either." Jiraiya is considered his guardian and Iruka is practically his brother, so no, Naruto does not have *any* friends."The truth is, he's had a rougher past than you." Better not mention the part about the murder attempt.thought Kakashi.

"Huh?" came Inari's confused expression.

Kakashi looked into Inari's sad eyes and emphasized his next point. "But I have never seen him cry or complain." Pausing for effect. "It's because of that... (Looks for the right word) **isolation** that sometimes, he doesn't trust people. It's a *VERY* lonely existence he'd had to live through. But he's still trying to fit in, to care, to be in a group, and to earn that group's acknowledgement. He's probably sick and tired of crying and being alone. He knows what it really means to be strong, perhaps even more so than your father, or

myself. Naruto may understand your feelings better than anyone."
Commented Kakashi.

"What?!" Inari's eyes showed a little bit of indignation and refusal, not understanding how Kakashi could compare him to Naruto.

Kakashi smiled at him indulgently. "Because even though he doesn't show it, Naruto doesn't seem to be able to be *NOT* concerned about you." I remember I overheard Jiraiya-sama saying something about Naruto having a major weakness when it came to kids in pain, especially the younger ones.

The next day, Kakashi, Sakura, Sasuke and Tazuna all set off towards the bridge. Naruto was left in the house to finally have some peace and quiet to sleep.

(1) Sorry, I just couldn't resist adding stuff that Neji had talked about before hand. In this way, Naruto doesn't have to act like such an ignorant ingrate when he faces Neji in the Chuunin Exam.

(2) A little bit of Hinata in there too when he explains that he wants to change himself. Yes, Naruto does admit he is already strong, but he doesn't want to feel so insecure all his life, and so, he decides to face his problem head on.

Thank you all so much for all your wonderful and supportive reviews! It really did help me push myself to finish this chapter off. I'd just like all of you to know that I thoroughly appreciate it.

And I'd also like to thank X2DarkLord for volunteering to be my beta. Then again, he gets to read the story first before any of you. ;; But don't worry, hopefully, there won't be much errors to change. Hopefully. Keep your fingers cross.

Um.. I'm sorry if this chapter is a bit slow and nothing really happens but it's a build up to the next chapter, which **WILL** be quite a wait because the entire thing is practically **ONE BIG FIGHT SCENE**. And

I'll have to think about all the fighting moves and come up with jutsus. It's gonna be hard to write. So you're all warned, the next chapter might take me a while to finish but after the conclusion of the Haku Vs Naruto fight, they'll all go back to Konoha where I will have a LOT of fun playing around with the plot. I can't wait!!

Um.. another thing I'd like to ask for your opinions is about the title:

How many of you prefer just leaving it as it is? "Faith in Humanity"?

How many of you prefer the title suggestion: "Searching for Meaning"?

How many of you prefer the title suggestion: "Restoration of Faith"?

How many of you prefer the title suggestion: "Reason to trust"?

Please review and tell me your choices, I'll pick from these list.
Thank you all for your support and remember to review. I thrive on reviews!!

Chapter 5

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test.

Reply to my wonderful reviewers:

To ccslover, liemtenshi, Nikkler, KiokuYume, Emotwo, The-Tempest, DarkDemonMaster, Kuroi Hikari, Thu666, Lil Washu1, --NC--, Grand Admiral Gin, Suguishi, Pyr00tje, Keira, RuByMoOn17, dalpin crage, Kyubi88, Alyana, DrazenFlames, Licht Sieger, Gromph, EmeraldBlossom, Geonitz, hmr, zekkyu, Wormkaizer, maguswizard, SilverKnight7, Silver Dragonfly, Lyxeria: Thank you ALL SOO MUCH! I've got all the chapters beta-read so they should be a lot better than before.

Jonathan Shim: Gomen!!! It wasn't beta-read before and I was in a rush so it wasn't exactly edited... ;;; As to the underscores, it's because I upload all these chapters in PLAIN TEXT FORMAT, so it DOESN'T HAVE *ITALICS* OR **BOLD** !!! But since so many of you are soo bloody use to italics and bold, I'm trying to change all of my stuff into html format, which support those features. Happy now?!

To Rashaka and Chris: As I've said before, it's not BETA-read and I ALSO said that I have a problem with TENSES AND GRAMMAR!!! I Know I've said it about 3 times at the very least, so please STOP complaining to me about the SAME things. I know my weakness better than you guys and yes, I AM trying to change that so give me SOME TIME.

babowonsuni: You can see how Haku compares to Naruto in this chapter, and I will be making Naruto go all out but only to a certain extent. His potential is much Much higher, however, he is still "uncomfortable" in harnessing it..

insanity: As you may well know, Jiraiya is not the one who taught Naruto the gentle fist style, it's someone else that you will all meet during the training period of the Chuunin exam. I didn't really want to change the original plotline too much because I'm afraid that it will no longer have the "FEEL" of the original Naruto, I wanted to stay true to the original story but still make it interesting from the perspective of a New Naruto. I READ ALL MY REVIEWS..

Hitomi No Ryu: Naruto is strong, but I wouldn't call him *too* strong... He does have weaknesses, it's just that he has never gone all out before so that's why it looks like he's so much stronger. Actually, the Jyuuken move I made up is not of the Hyuga, it's from another source. I came up with it when I wanted a move that will permanently paralyse a person's use of Chakra but not kill them, so this idea kinda popped up.

hattuteline: As I've said to insanity, I didn't want to change the original plot line completely because it will no longer FEEL like a Naruto story (for example, all those highschool stories on the Naruto Characters are literary not related to the original story at all and it doesn't have the essence - or what's inspiring - about the original). The OC will come to be but not now, I wanted to delve more into the personality of Naruto, have him grow up a bit more before throwing in an OC that totally screws his life up. "Raikan Mahi no jutsu" is actually translated from Chinese to Japanese, the Chinese version (without the "no jutsu" of course) basically means "Lightning shock Paralysis" or "Luei quen ma bi", if anyone is really interested.

Midnight Fairy: Thank you for reviewing, but no, the Demon fox will not be making an appearance. I want to keep him a surprise.

liukang: Currently, I've got 3 people helping me read, re-read, and re-read again to try to knot out all the errors. If errors still exist, you'll

bet I'll be asking for even more help. ;; Sometimes, I'm just so crap I surprise myself.

Sirus183: Naruto is only taking over for this part of the mission. After the fight you all will witness in this chapter, Naruto will not be able to battle, let alone teach anyone. But you'll find that out for yourself. And Kakashi isn't useless, he will be training Sakura and Sasuke for the Chapters afterwards, just not Naruto due to his severe injuries. As for Naruto learning from Kakashi, I didn't want Naruto to learn jutsus from Kakashi, but I would like them to grow closer together like an uncle to a nephew, instead of that awkward student-sensei relationship mixed in with favoritism and jealousy placed in the original story.

The majority of votes came in with people wanting me to keep the title as it is, and so it'll stay. Thank you all for giving me your opinions on the matter. I really appreciate all reviews.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. In this story, Naruto is a very conservative and internally insecure person whom refuses to acknowledge anyone unless they have proven themselves trustworthy.

This chapter will have less dialogue once the action starts, because I really don't like having a lot of talking when people are suppose to fight. So it might be a bit fast paced and a little bit confusing, I apologise for the inconveniences now. Um.. it starts off slow with the bit about Inari but as I've said before, once the actual Haku fights begin, then comes the fun, so be patient people. The fight scenes in this chapter are based on the manga but will diverge into very DIFFERENT endings. There'll be a LOT of **JUMPING** in the same time frame, so please bear with it. Here, you may get a glimpse of Naruto's true power as well as the introduction of my own original Tenkun no buki (Weapons of the Heavenly Warriors Series). Enjoy!

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 4

Naruto awakened to the sounds of bird chirping happily outside of his window as well as the bright sunshine beaming onto his face. He blinked groggily, deciding to turn away from the light and bury himself under the blankets again. Ugh! What's wrong with me! Naruto blinked several time and finally gazed blearily at his current surrounding. An unfamiliar room..His mind slowly rose to conscious level and he realised that this is *his* room, the one he had never used until now. Oh... that's why it's so much more comfortable than the forest ground.Naruto thought as he closed his eyes in tiredness, allowing himself to fall asleep again.

After a few long minutes of just lying on his futon, covered by blankets, Naruto realised that there was no way he could go back to sleep. He had always been a very energetic person, so once he's up, he's up indefinitely. There's no point in staying in bed. I'm just avoiding the inevitable.Depressingly, Naruto knew that he still didn't want to deal with the Inari issue from last night. I suppose I should apologise. Some of the things I've said weren't necessary...After a few more moments spent on reviewing his words last night, Naruto decided that he really didn't want to do it now. I'll apologise later, just not now..Recognising it as just an excuse, Naruto was still too hungry and too tired to bother pushing the subject at hand. I didn't even finish my dinner last night.Grumbled Naruto mentally.

After leaving his comfortable haven, Naruto set out to brush his teeth, comb his hair, change his clothes and finally, decided that he was ready to face the outside world. Upon reaching the kitchen, Naruto only found Tsunami there.

"Oh, Naruto-kun. You're finally awake!" Tsunami smiled at him, as if the events of last night didn't even faze her. "Your breakfast is

already prepared. I'll just bring it out for you now." And she set about doing just that.

Naruto sat nervously on the chair next to the empty table as Tsunami served him his well-earned food. He expected at least some backlash from the way he acted towards her son yesterday night and didn't really like the fact that they're all ignoring the problem. Sighing, Naruto decided to be the first to broach the subject at hand. "Um... about last night... I'm really sorry. I didn't..."

"It's quite alright." Tsunami interrupted. Naruto only managed to blink back at her wide-eyed in response. She giggled at his expression and made to sit down beside him on the table. "Listen Naruto. I don't blame you for reacting like that last night. I know you've been under a lot of stress lately. And frankly, Inari kinda deserved that. He really needed someone to force the truth on him... and I'm just not strong enough to do that." Tsunami looked down sadly. "I'm glad you said what you said, though not the way you said it. One way or the other, he *needed* to hear it. And for that, I thank you for having the courage in doing that."

After that finished statement, Tsunami returned to doing what she was doing before hand, and Naruto was left alone to contemplate what had just happened while he finished his breakfast in a mechanical fashion. It wasn't ramen after all, so he didn't need to show any enthusiasm towards eating it. After his late breakfast, Naruto decided to take a stroll outside.

"Is he gone?" Inari whispered to his mother in the kitchen.

"Yes, dear. Naruto went out for a walk." Answered Tsunami.

Inari sighed and sat at the same table that Naruto had just left only moments ago. A long silence ensured as Inari tried to find something to talk about. Finding none, he shook his head in frustration and started getting up off the chair and left the kitchen to go to his room.

Half an hour later, Tsunami got two very unexpected visitors. Two of Gatou's henchmen (wearing Samurai-like clothes) sliced their way through the front door of Tazuna's home and started walking in as if they owned the place. Tsunami was shocked and scared, knowing that she was currently helpless without the added protection of the ninjas; she of course froze in fear. The men asked her if she was Tsunami, Tazuna's daughter. She nodded jerkily in reply. They smiled savagely at her and grabbed onto her arms, telling her that she had become their hostage from now on.

Inari, hearing his mother's scream while still in his bedroom, ran towards the sound to investigate. As a result, he found the kitchen and living room trashed and his mother shivering in fear on the floor, arms being grabbed tightly by two strangers with swords strapped onto their belts.

"MOM!!!" Inari screamed in fright.

"What? A kid?" One of the men seemed surprised.

"INARI! Don't come near me! RUN AWAY!!!" Tsunami shrieked, knowing that what ever happens to her doesn't matter, as long as Inari is safe.

"Should we take him too?" The same man asked the other.

"We only need one hostage." Answered his partner.

"Heh heh... Should I kill him?" The first man sneered viciously, striding towards a shivering Inari on the ground. The ugly looking man slowly but surely pulled his long sword out, ignoring Tsunami's desperate shouts in the background. Inari shook violently in fear and started crying as he watched the two men descend on him.

"WAIT!! If you touch that child... I will bite my tongue and kill myself! YOU HEAR ME!!! You want a hostage, right!? Then leave him alone!!!" Tsunami screamed to catch both men's attention, and

showed her determination in doing just as she had threatened if they did not comply.

After a moment of silence, the man pushed his sword back where it belonged and started walking away leaving a snivelling Inari where he had kneeled over in fear and resignation. "Heh... Thank your mom kid."

As the two men continued to mumble to each other and dragged a reluctant Tsunami away, all Inari did was kneel on the floor and cry. Mom. I'm sorry. I'm weak. I couldn't protect you... And I don't want to die. I'm afraid and scared. I don't want to die.

That was the moment when memories of Naruto's words came back: *So it's okay for you to pose as the star of a tragedy and cry all day? Then just keep on crying forever, you cry-baby!*

Kakashi's previous words also added to the effect: *He's probably sick and tired of crying and being alone. He knows what it really means to be strong, perhaps even more so than your father, or myself.*

And so did his late father's words: *If it's really precious, even if you lose your life, you must protect it with these two hands.*

They're all so incredible, so cool, and so strong. Will I... Will I also be able to become... strong? Dad? With each thought, more flashes of memories, good ones, bad ones, all flicked in Inari's mind, helping him make one final choice. Inari rubbed his eyes clear of the tears that had plagued him for years. It's time I stop being a cry-baby!

"WAIT!" shouted Inari as he ran towards the two men and his mother with determination blazing in his eyes. I WILL NOT RUN!! I CANNOT RUN!! I'M NOT RUNNING AWAY ANY MORE!!!(1)

"Huh, it's that kid!?" The first man who had threatened to kill Inari said in astonishment and amusement.

"Inari! What are you doing?!" Shrieked Tsunami in fear. "No! Don't come here! Run Inari! RUN AWAY!!"

I WON'T RUN ANYMORE!!"LET GO OF MY MOM!!!!" Inari bellowed in anger.

"Cut him." Ordered the man who rarely spoke.

"Sure." Smiled the first, eager to finally get some action.

"INARI!!!" Screamed Tsunami in fright.

Just as the two men raised their swords, intending to slice Inari into pieces, they were both surprised that what they had cut in their haste was nothing more than pieces of wood. *KAWARIMI NO JUTSU* ?!went through both men's mind as a new voice joined their confusion.

"Sorry for being late. But great job Inari!" A slightly tired Naruto smiled genuinely back at Inari, whom was looking at him with shock written over his face. Tsunami was also safely taken away from the two henchmen as she was now sitting behind a relaxed Naruto.

The two men were obviously furious at being tricked by a brat and started charging towards Naruto in rage. Naruto stood confidently in front waiting for them.

"Are you going to be okay?" asked a nervous Inari, looking back and forth between Naruto and the charging men.

"I'm fine. I wouldn't even have to lift a finger." Naruto smirked as several Kage Bunshins (shadow clones) suddenly jumped out of the surrounding water, and some even appearing behind the henchmen themselves. After a few seconds of fighting, the clones triumphantly disappeared into smoke leaving behind two very battered and bruised men.

"How did you know these samurais were coming here?" asks Inari curiously.

"Hn? There was a cut up boar in the forest. And a bunch of trees had sword marks on them as well. The marks were heading this way so I got worried. But I still stayed behind a while to help heal the injured boar, since it wasn't dead yet. And I rushed back here as fast as I could." Explained Naruto sheepishly. Actually, he had to take a slight rest after healing the boar. He had exerted himself quite a bit to reach here in time. He's still very tired from his two weeks of almost no sleep and very limited food.

A slight pause in silence followed. Naruto took a deep breath and tried to broach the original subject (that he dreaded) again, "Um Inari..."

"Huh?" Asked Inari, uncertain.

Naruto rubbed his head sheepishly. "About yesterday. I'm sorry. I didn't mean those words. Just forget it okay?" Breathing in another gulp of courage, Naruto reached out and rubbed Inari's head affectionately. The last time he's done that was on Ellie's (2) head, which was more than 2 years ago.

"I was wrong, you are strong..." Naruto's final words brought Inari to tears.

Inari's eyes widened in surprise and started building up with moisture. "Damn it. I decided I wasn't going to cry anymore. You're going to make fun of me and call me a cry-baby." Inari struggled to stop the tears.

Naruto pulled him in for a hug. "I never said it was wrong to cry, just don't cry all the time. People cry for different reasons: because they're scared, angry, hurt, happy and so on. Sometimes, it's good to release your emotions in tears. Just... never give up hope! It's okay to cry when you're happy." Inari hugged Naruto back in relief.

Without letting go of Inari, Naruto looked back at the beaten up henchmen. "If they're here, then Kakashi, Sasuke and Sakura would also have their hands full right about now. I'm gonna go and help them." Looking back at a smiling Inari, "I can count on you here, right?"

"YUP!" Inari finally let go of the hug, and held up his thumb in a *good guy* sign. Naruto smiled and disappeared into a cloud of smoke, using teleportation instead of travelling on foot (3).

[At the bridge] **Around the same time as Naruto starting to take his walk so the timing was the same**

Kakashi and company had just arrived at the bridge building sight only to find all the rest of the bridge builders lying dead or unconscious on the ground. Immediately, the ninja group members formed a slight circle around Tazuna, protecting him from the unseen enemy.

Just then, a slow and slightly visible mist surrounded the group and suddenly, ten Zabuza forms emerged from the mist. Mizu Bunshins (Water clones) confirmed all three ninjas, as both Sasuke and Sakura started shivering in tension and excitement. Kakashi looked over at Sasuke, nodding in his direction as an indication for him to start first. Sasuke nodded back and immediately disappeared from view, silently slicing up each and every clone in sight using his newly acquired skills of the Chakra enhanced kunais and his newly developed speed. Within seconds, Sasuke had returned to his original position and all 10 clones splatter into water molecules.

That's when Haku and the real Zabuza finally emerged from the surrounding mist. Zabuza made a slight comment to Haku, saying that he might have found a new rival in speed. Haku nodded back silently, acknowledging the fact that Zabuza had just asked him to take care of the genins. Haku stepped forward in a challenging stance aiming his steady gaze at Sasuke.

"I'll take care of him." Sasuke said, not moving his gaze from the boy but he could see the others agreeing from the corner of his eyes. He too, stepped forward, to accept the challenge.

Suddenly, both Haku and Sasuke advanced into fighting positions. Haku, spun into action, reaching Sasuke's side in less than a second, and tried to stab him with a metal needle. Sasuke reacted by blocking it with his own Chakra enhanced kunai, clashing metal against metal. But Haku's needles started to bent under the stress of the powerful kunai, and he decided to change tactic by performing a one handed seal. HE CAN DO SEALS WITH ONE HAND?! This thought went through all three Konoha ninja's minds but it was short lived, because just then, Haku stomped his foot on the ground and the jutsu immediately reacted.

"HiJutsu Sensatsu Suishou no Jutsu!! (Special jutsu: Flying water needles)!" Haku yelled as the metal needle held in his hand finally gave way to the more powerful kunai. But it did not matter anyway, for Haku had immediately jumped to the side to avoid the multitude of water needles that had since surged from the surrounding wet grounds and poised to strike at Sasuke. To Haku's surprise, Sasuke was able to dodge the needles by jumping straight up, avoiding all of their deadly strikes. From the air, Sasuke shot several Chakra enhanced shurikens at Haku.

Haku managed to dodge all of these power-enhanced shurikens as he back-flipped away from danger. The shurikens barely missed harming Haku's body and landed on the surface of the bridge, leaving behind crater-like holes a metre wide each. Haku back flipped one final time onto the ledge of the bridge and launched himself to the side, trying to avoid the last shuriken. To his surprise, the shuriken changed direction in mid air and continued flying towards him. Haku shifted to his side slightly again, just barely missing the shuriken but it still managed to cut across Haku's right shoulder resulting in some small amounts of blood being released from the wound.

When the shuriken turned around again to aim at Haku, Haku managed to grab onto it with his right hand and started dissolving Sasuke's Chakra with his own, returning the shuriken to normal. Things made out of Chakra can be destroyed by simply pouring Chakra into them.(4)

However, Haku had become so focused on the shuriken that he didn't realise, until too late, that Sasuke had suddenly appeared behind him and was trying to stab him with another kunai. Haku barely blocked the second attack with his left arm. Nevertheless, as he saw Sasuke preparing to flick the Chakra enhanced kunai right into his face, he ducked in time to miss the kunai flying past, just barely missing his head. By then, Haku barely noticed Sasuke twisting his body in such a way that he managed to ram Haku's face with his swinging foot.

Thrown from the impact, Haku immediately tried to gather himself together, doing a somersault in mid-air and landing awkwardly on the wet ground, dragging himself a bit due to the slipperiness of the water. As Haku looked up, Sasuke had already prepared a new seal. "Gokakyuu no jutsu! (Powerful Fireball Technique)" yelled Sasuke as he blew a huge burst of fire from his mouth towards Haku.

Haku reacted instantly, performing a seal of his own. "Suijin Heki no Jutsu (Water Barrier no jutsu)!" He yelled, creating a huge wall of water to dispose of Sasuke's fire. Once the fire was dissolved, revealing Sasuke's annoyed face on the other side, Haku launched himself into another set of seals. While doing so, he commented to Sasuke: "It seems I have underestimated you, it won't happen again."

He called upon the water summoned by his previous jutsu to surround Sasuke completely and then finish performing his most deadly seal. "Hijutsu: Makyō Hyōshō (Special Jutsu: Demonic Ice mirrors)!" Sasuke was soon stunned into immobility as shards of mirrors started forming from all sides surrounding him. Sasuke pulled himself out of his shock and started launching "Gokakyuu no jutsu" (Powerful Fireball Techniques) one after another, trying desperately

to melt the ice mirrors before they completed their formation, but to no avail.

Again, to Sasuke's surprise, Haku seemed to approach the mirror and merge into it, becoming part of its reflection. Sasuke started shooting several Chakra enhanced kunais towards that particular mirror, hoping to kill Haku while he was in it. However, to Sasuke's continual annoyance and horror, all the kunais struck through the mirror but then the mirror itself quickly started regenerating until it revived itself into its original form.

"You won't be able to escape my demonic ice mirrors." Haku said icily as his reflection began appearing on all the mirrors' surfaces and he started to bombard Sasuke with his metal needles for all corners.

Sasuke screamed, trying desperately to avoid the deadly needles: "AAARRGGG!!!!!!!"

"Sakura, guard Tazuna and stay behind me! If you can, get the rest of the workers out of here." Kakashi ordered as he watched Sasuke's fight anxiously though purposely not showing any of his nervousness in front of his enemy. Hearing the scream, he rushed off towards his pupil but was suddenly blocked by Zabuza when he somersaulted over the demonic mirrors and landed directly in front of him.

"Your opponent is *me* ! Kakashi..." Zabuza sneered cruelly. *DAMN* !thought Kakashi. "If you get by me, I'll kill those two behind you."

Thoroughly worried about Sasuke, now trapped in the ice mirrors, Sakura decided to take a small chance, and began running towards the others while throwing another Chakra enhanced kunai at the mirrors. Hoping that the mirror was weaker on the outside so she could get through to help Sasuke. Sakura was surprised and then disappointed when Haku unrepentantly emerged from the mirror catching her kunai easily.

"Hn." Zabuza saw his opportunity to kill Tazuna right there and then, so he threw several shurikens towards Sakura aiming to kill her. At the same time, he immediately followed that action by swinging his massive sword in an arc, trying to decapitate Kakashi (while he was distracted by Sakura's actions) in front of him. Kakashi blocked the swing with a kunai of his own and both of them could hear Sakura blocking all the shurikens that Zabuza had sent her way with her own kunai in hand. Thank God I asked Naruto to train them beforehand. Thought Kakashi while he concentrated on trying to kick Zabuza away so that he may be able to reach Sasuke.

However, Zabuza recognising what he was trying to do, decided on jumping backwards, dragging his massive sword with him as he made the mist thicken by doing several more quick hand seals. With the decreased visibility, Kakashi cursed himself mentally because he had forgotten that Zabuza was a silent killer and he had the advantage currently. A sound of movement was suddenly heard from behind and Kakashi immediately turned around just in time to see Sakura blocking Zabuza's big sword from slicing Tazuna-san straight down the middle. Sakura's speed and senses had developed a lot. Kakashi started rushing towards them and managed to kick Zabuza's sword away from a struggling Sakura from his side. Sliding in front to block Zabuza from his prey, Kakashi quickly lifted his head protector to reveal the Sharingan. Finally, with the Sharingan on, Kakashi would probably be able to combat against Zabuza more effectively.

Behind him, Sakura quickly performed a new set of seals, grabbing onto Tazuna-san and disappearing into the mist. She had just used the Invisibility Genjutsu that Naruto had taught her and had also completely erased any sight, sound, scent or any other sense of them, even if they are hidden in the mist.

While Kakashi was busy with Zabuza, Sasuke was finding it very difficult to figure out a way to defeat his opponent. Now, with his limited Sharingan that had showed up during his fight inside the

Makyō Hyōshō (Demonic Ice Mirrors), Sasuke was able to dodge most of Haku's deadly needles but was still at a loss in finding a way out of this death trap. With all the continuous fighting, Sasuke was rapidly running out of Chakra and soon would be unable to do any more jutsus. Finally, deciding on trying out one last time at breaking Haku's mirrors, Sasuke decided to use up the rest of his Chakra in this final attack.

Sasuke acted upon his plan during the fight when Haku started leaving the safety of his ice mirrors to rush towards Sasuke, intending to stab him with his needles in close combat. Sasuke hit back using his kunai. He managed to punch Haku's face and force him to fly back due to the impact, smashing against a mirror then falling forward onto the ground. Gaining some time, Sasuke immediately threw another Chakra-enhanced kunai towards Haku, whom recovered just in time to use his hands to push and jumped backwards, merging back into the mirror, barely avoiding the kunai hitting him. Said kunai smashed through the mirror but before Sasuke had a chance to escape, Haku reformed his mirror blocking Sasuke's escape.

To Haku's surprise, the kunai had a string attached to it still held by Sasuke. Sasuke quickly held the string within his mouth, performing a few hand seals, and called forth a new technique. "Katon: Ryūka no Kutsu (Fire type: Dragon Fire no jutsu)!"(4) Fire appeared from Sasuke's lips and travelled down the string quickly setting alight the mirror that was blocking its path following the kunai. Haku quickly thrust his hand out, grabbing onto the string before the fire reached his mirror and froze it. The ice that flowed from Haku's Chakra consumed the fire completely. Once done, Haku easily cut the string away to complete the reformation his mirror, while Sasuke knelt on the floor in exhaustion. Keeping the Sharingan going was really draining his Chakra and with that last assault, Sasuke wasn't sure if he could continue fighting any more.

Haku then performed a familiar seal as he had used it before, "HiJutsu Sensatsu Suishō no Jutsu!! (Special jutsu, Flying Water

needles)!" The leftover water on the ground lifted up and started flying towards Sasuke from every angle, striking his already battered body into submission. Sasuke tried to escape but with the mirrors blocking his upward passage, he could only avoid so much using his Sharingan. As a result, he ended up being stabbed very deeply on some parts of his back. Bleeding profusely, Sasuke finally collapsed onto the cold floor in exhaustion again, this time he had completely used up all his Chakra and was unable to battle anymore.

Closing his eyes in anger, frustration and disappointment, Sasuke waited for Haku to kill him off. DAMN IT!!! WHY?! WHY AM I STILL SOOO WEAK!!!!???bellowed Sasuke mentally AM I STILL NOT STRONG *ENOUGH* ?! HOW FAR AM I SUPPOSE TO GO TO FINALLY REACH UP TO *YOU* , BROTHER?!!!! HOW HARD AM I SUPPOSE TO *WORK* ?! AND NOW... NOW... I'M ABOUT TO DIE! I DON'T WANT TO DIEEEEE!!!Desperately hoping for a miracle, the fates seem to have answered him this time.

Haku was just about to finish off Sasuke within the confines of his mirror, when a sudden wave blast of water overflowing with Lightning and electricity smashed against one side of his row of Demonic Ice Mirrors. The water forced its way through the barrier, breaking one of the mirrors and flooding the area within (surrounding protectively around the fallen form of Sasuke) while electrocuting Haku with a high voltage of electricity as it went by. "Raiten Mizu Bakuhatu" (Lightning Water Blast/Explosion) (5) the calm voice of Naruto filtered in as he smashed his way through the Mirror's foundations. For the time being, Haku was unable to move due to the paralysis caused by the electricity still coursing through his veins, so he could only watch on as the electrified water slowly dissipated letting Naruto across the still wet ground. He walked slowly towards Sasuke and knelt down next to him, starting a quiet conversation with the fallen boy.

"Always late, aren't you? Still as unmotivated as ever, dobe." Sasuke grunted through his pain. At least I have my *Pride* !

Naruto smiled slightly at Sasuke's ever-arrogant attitude, even when facing death. "Don't talk and don't move. You'll be fine, Sasuke." Naruto checked over Sasuke's injuries but found that the needles did not attack any vital points, so with time, Sasuke would recover completely.

Sasuke gasped in slight pain as he is being lightly probed with a gentle finger and showed some of his fear. "I don't want to die. I still have my dream... to kill Itachi."

"Hush now, rest, you'll be fine, just tired, let me handle the battle for now." Naruto looked at Sasuke determinedly.

"Heh, and let you hog all the glory, no thanks." Sasuke snorted.

Naruto smiled gently again, "I don't think you're in any position to complain, I'll give you permission to kick my butt later but for now, let me handle things."

"Heh, a baka all the way." Said Sasuke as he drifted into unconsciousness and Naruto quickly tried to heal some of the more severe wounds by pushing his own Chakra into Sasuke to strengthen his body. I know he would never allow me to heal him if he was conscious, so it's better if he stays unconscious.

Once satisfied with Sasuke's eventual recovery, Naruto stood up once again to face Haku. Already, the Ice mirrors have all reformed and Haku had recovered from his paralysis. "That was impressive. But I will not let it happen again." With that said, Haku launched many needles towards Naruto. Naruto dodged most of them but some still managed to injure him slightly. Coming to a standstill, Naruto took the opportunity to have a talk with Haku.

"Why? Why are you fighting us? Why are you trying to destroy Sasuke's dream, Tazuna-san's dream, by killing them." Naruto asked, hoping that it would bring some remorse into the other boy.

"Because I too have a dream. I want to protect someone precious to me. To work and fight for that person. To make that person's dream come true. My dream is to fulfil Zabuza-san's ambition. To help him take over the Water country and become the Mizukage himself." Haku answered determinedly.

"Why Zabuza?" Naruto questioned, still not quite understanding. "I know you. You are that boy I met yesterday morning. Why did you not kill me then when you had the chance, instead of choosing to fight us now?"

"Because..." Haku paused. "To become a True Shinobi is difficult for me. If possible, I don't want to kill you and I don't want you to kill me. However, if you come at me to stop Zabuza-san, I *can* destroy my kind heart with a blade and become a true Shinobi. This bridge is the place where we fight for our dreams. For my dream, I can become a Shinobi and kill you. Do you understand?" Haku confirmed.

"Yes, I understand." Naruto nodded in recognition that there was nothing he can say that will sway the boy's opinion. "And for my dream, I can't die here. No matter what the cost, I refuse to die" Naruto also acknowledged this fact, but continued with the rest of his explanation: "However, I won't kill you."

"Then you are naïve and not a true Shinobi. Shinobi's are tools of war that are without emotions and feelings. We are simply weapons." Haku shifted into a battle stance as he ended his part of the conversation.

"I know, but I refuse to acknowledge that path." Naruto made his final point. Quietly, Naruto mumbled to himself though still talking to Haku, he ended the rest of his point almost subconsciously. "I'm a lot like you. I used to be like that... But I don't want to be any more. I'll follow my own path, the path I chose."

With the conversation finished, Naruto immediately performed a complicated seal. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Tenkun no buki! Come forth, Ginshi no himo!" (Summoning Technique! Weapons of the Ten

Heavenly Warriors! Silver Strings of Death!!) (6) A puff of smoke appeared and slid away revealing a metal object on Naruto's right wrist. It looked like a thick metal wristband shaped like a common reel of thread, only bigger with the hole able to fit a person's wrist through. These particular threads in this device were made up of millions of tiny silver strings.

Haku, confused by the odd-looking object chose to ignore it and sent hundreds of needles towards Naruto. Naruto calmly raised his right hand (with the object attached) towards Haku and said in a soft tone. "Absolute defence."

Immediately the strings originally wrapped around Naruto's wrist object started moving of their own accord. Many strings began twisting and swirling around Naruto creating a barrier protecting Naruto and Sasuke from the on coming needles, battling and deflecting them easily. Having dealt with the needles, Naruto silently sent all the silver strings to launch at all the Ice Mirrors, smashing its way through the thin ice and shattering them in the process by absorbing the Chakra used to create them.

At the same time, Naruto also sent three strings towards Haku, smashing its way through the Mirror currently inhabited by him to wrap around Haku's left and right wrist tightly as well as his abdomen. Haku was rendered immobile as the strings pushed him directly through the Demonic mirror and started sucking up his Chakra as well. With Haku in possession, the rest of the Demonic mirrors slowly started to crumble away and the rest of the strings returned to Naruto leaving only the three attached to Haku.

Looking around, Naruto sensed someone close by, whom had used his own original jutsu to hide themselves. It could only be Sakura. He then ordered her to take care of Sasuke while he dealt with Haku, which she promptly did.

Currently, Kakashi was busy parrying all of Zabuza's shurikens, kunais, and his big sword. Slightly slowing down during part of the

fight, Kakashi purposely let Zabuza land a hit on his right shoulder, resulting in a large wound as well as leaving a trail of blood on the big weapon. That was the moment when Zabuza became distracted by Haku's scream of pain as he was pinned by Naruto's strings. With the time that Naruto had granted him, Kakashi quickly pulled a scroll out of his vest, flipping it through the air, rolling it open and dabbing part of his blood on it, closing the scroll again and performed a complicated seal. Once finish, he slammed his hand (with the scroll it between) onto the ground and shouted: "Ninpou Summon! Doton: Tsuiga no Jutsu!! (Earth type: Earth Tracking Fang no jutsu!!)"

Once the words were called, Kakashi's summoned dogs immediately buried themselves under ground, travelling towards Zabuza's currently location using their sensitive sense of smell. Once located, the dogs smashed their way out of the ground, surprising Zabuza and biting him into immobilisation. While the dogs kept Zabuza trapped, his summoned mist automatically started clearing, showing Sakura next to an unconscious but breathing Sasuke, and Haku still trapped in Naruto's strings.

Unseen by both, Naruto was actually starting to shake slightly due to the stress of handling the special weapon. He only hoped that he could let go of Haku soon, because if he kept on holding the weapon for too long, not only will Haku's life be in danger, so will his. However, unbeknownst to Kakashi, Naruto's predicament was not noticed and neither will it end soon.

Kakashi took some precious time to catch his breath back. Gathering his strength, Kakashi performed several seals to create his only original jutsu, the Chidori (Thousand Bird / Lightning Edge). Once complete, the sounds of the thousand birdcalls can be heard throughout the bridge and into the surrounding areas. Kakashi started running towards Zabuza in high speed with determination in his eyes. However, he's attack was interrupted again when layers upon layers of ice mirrors emerged and stood in his way defiantly!

Naruto did his best to hold Haku away from the fight between Kakashi and Zabuza with his silver strings but it still couldn't stop Haku from desperately trying to save Zabuza. Using the last of his strength and Chakra, Haku directed his right hand to perform seals, summoning as many Mirrors as possible to stand in the way between Zabuza and the rapidly approaching Kakashi. With his left hand, Haku managed to throw several needles at Kakashi's scroll on the ground to un-summon his summons.

The action happened so fast that no one was sure as to the outcome of the fight. Finally, when the smoke from the resulting blast of the Chidori completely cleared. The scene showed Kakashi managing to strike all the way through Haku's Mirror barriers and had his palm against Zabuza's shoulder. Zabuza seemed to be hurt but not as much as to lead to his death. The Mirrors took on the blunt of the attack, water and ice managing to absorb most of the electricity of Kakashi's Chidori before it reached Zabuza.

Kakashi was surprised by this event but just managed to avoid Zabuza's big sword as it was swung to decapitate him. Landing some distance away, Kakashi took some time to survey his opponent's injuries. Left arm still working holding the sword, but the right arm is useless because the Chidori has completely pulled through all his shoulder muscles. Determining that he had a good chance to win, Kakashi continued on with the fight.

However, even with one arm, Zabuza was still a formidable opponent. Though, due to Zabuza's own exhaustion, Kakashi was able to slam two more kunais into the elbow of Zabuza's left arm, leaving both arms broken and immobile. Kakashi was just preparing to launch again when the infamous Gatou appeared out of nowhere with many henchmen behind him sneering and laughing at the current combatants.

Gatou sneered coldly at Zabuza and Haku as well as the rest of the Konoha ninja team members. Naruto ignored his obvious insults to concentrate on how many men he had brought with him. Around fifty or so, I can handle them with Ginshi no himo. Naruto thought as

Gatou finished off his irritating speech and called his men to attack. However, Gatou surprised all of them when he told his men to leave the snow boy (indicating Haku with his fair complexion). He wanted to take some pleasure in getting his revenge on that boy!

Gatou smirked cruelly as Zabuza snarled back in anger. Naruto continued to sway rather dangerously at the moment but still concentrated enough to hear Zabuza and Kakashi acknowledging the fact that they were no longer enemies. Relieved by that announcement, Naruto slowly but surely lowers an exhausted Haku onto the floor. But no sooner had he done that, Zabuza asked Kakashi for a spare kunai, Kakashi readily threw one towards him, that Zabuza suddenly launched towards Gatou, intending on killing him using the kunai held in his mouth.

While Zabuza ran off aiming to kill Gatou, Haku could only watch helplessly as Zabuza was stabbed time and time again on his way. After cutting off Gatou's head Zabuza finally fell onto the ground in exhaustion. Haku then became even more frantic as the all those henchmen started to advance on an unconscious Zabuza, but he was stopped by Naruto.

Kakashi had told Naruto to take point because he himself had ran out of Chakra with the use of his Chidori, but Naruto still didn't want to kill anyone. I'll just threaten them a little. Thought Naruto as he aimed his strings towards them and randomly grabbed onto several of the henchmen, lifting them off the ground and into the air, while sucking their energy.

"If you move one more step, I will kill those already in the air and will also have the pleasure of killing the rest of you!" Shouted Naruto in his pissed off mood of voice. The rest of the group became slightly nervous by the threat. Soon however, Naruto was starting to sway dangerously again while he was still standing. Kakashi had also just noticed Naruto's odd behaviour when he was distracted by Sakura's scream of joy. Behind them, Sasuke had finally regain consciousness and was just in time to watch the rest of the fight.

While the henchmen were confused over what they should do next, Inari came to the rescue with the other villagers, scaring them off once and for all.

Once all the chaos was done and over with. Naruto watched as Haku, forcing himself onto his feet, ran towards an injured Zabuza immediately. Naruto, firmly exhausted, knelt down on the cold ground. He noticed that his hearing was starting to dim slightly as if he was far away from his current surrounding. His visions too, started to blur, turning into black and white representations. SHIT! I'VE HAD IT ON TOO LONG!!! Trying to focus, Naruto stabbed his own right hand with a kunai to keep it immobile. Ignoring the distant shouts of his name, Naruto used the pain that flared up his right hand to help him concentrate more. He held his left with the palm open to the side of the silver device on his right wrist, and released ("Kai") his summoned weapon.

In a blink of a second, Naruto found himself screaming in agony as a white-hot flame burned through the inner tissues of his right arm. From the wrist to the shoulder, everything was hot and in immense pain. Muscles and blood burst out of his opening points and his veins are all singing with liquid fire. Understandably, Naruto fell into unconscious pretty quickly after such a shock; he dimly noticed that there were many cries for his name just before he passed out. He vaguely remembered that there seemed to be a lot of people worried about him.

Naruto slowly but surely opened his eyes, but he had to blink them shut again at the glare of the sun. Sensing that someone was near him, he whispered a question, since his throat hurts also. "How long?"

"Four days." Answered Kakashi's voice. "The fever broke early this morning."

Painfully, Naruto nodded his acknowledgement and promptly fell into unconsciousness again.

The next day, Naruto recovered further from his ordeal and asked Kakashi for a status report on his health. Kakashi summarised.

For four days straight, Naruto had been unconscious and on the verge of death due to his sudden high fever. His entire right arm was still completely immobile and useless until it healed (which in itself was already a miracle) and he will be feeling a lot of pain if he moves it even a little bit. Kakashi and Sasuke had both healed a lot due to Haku's herbal remedies and Zabuza had died on the second day due to the severity of his injuries. Before he died though, Zabuza had also set Haku free and wanted Haku to continue living and live happily. Due to Haku's involvement with the Coup de ta, he would be killed if he ever returned to the Hidden Mist Village. Kakashi had asked him if he wanted to return to Konoha with the rest of the group and Haku had graciously accepted. He was extremely glad that Kakashi and the other two had accepted him even through he had done terrible things to them in the past.

When Kakashi had finished his report, the other occupants of the house took that moment to surge on an un-expecting and still injured Naruto.

"NARUTO! YOU'RE FINALLY AWAKE!" Shouted Sakura happily as she entered the room followed by the rest of the gang.

"NARUTO-NISAN!! NARUTO-NISAN!! ARE YOU ALRIGHT???!!
YOU FEELING BETTER NOW!!??" Screamed Inari, even louder.

Naruto groaned from the attention and tried to hide under his blanket, but flinched in pain due to his arm. He had forgotten that he wasn't supposed to move it just yet. "Don't move your right arm, Naruto-kun!" Exclaimed a familiar and yet unfamiliar voice. Naruto looked up at the same boy he had first meet in the woods, as well as the same boy he had fought a few days ago.

Naruto blinked. "Hi! I don't think we were ever properly introduced before." Haku smiled and giggled slightly in response.

"My name is Haku."

"Good to finally meet you Haku. My name is Uzumaki Naruto... I'd shake hands but as you well know, I can't move one right now."

Haku giggled again while Sasuke snorted in the background, something sounding suspiciously like "Idiot."

"Alright. Alright. Give the guy some room to breath." Kakashi consoled as the rest of them moved slightly away from Naruto but stayed in the same room. Looking pointedly at Naruto. "So, are you going to explain yourself or am I going to have to force you to talk."

Naruto looked back at Kakashi determined face and sighed. There's no way for him to escape interrogation. "It's called the Ginshi no Himo (Silver Strings of Death)... It's one of the Tenkun no buki (Weapons of the Heavenly Warriors)."

Kakashi blinked. "But that's just legends! There's no way that it could possibly exist!"

Naruto interrupted: "They do exist. And they're very powerful."

Sakura looked confused: "What are... **Tenkun no buki** ? Kakashi-sensei?"

Kakashi paused to gather his thoughts. "Thousands of years ago, when demons still rule this realm and humans are always living in fear of them. The first of the Shinobi people whom specialise in Chakra studies decided to rid the world of demons to create a peaceful world. However, because they were weaker then the demons, they started experimenting and created weapons that would be able to rival the power of such demons. The first of these Super Powerful Weapons were called the **Tenkun no Buki** , or the *Weapons of the Heavenly Warriors* . It is said that they are so powerful; they always inflict pain and injuries on the opponent as well as the user, so only a selected few could possibly handle any of these weapons successfully. When all ten of these weapons are in

use, no demon will ever stand a chance, and so the demons soon disappeared or went into hiding. When it is concluded by our ancestors that these weapons are too dangerous to be kept by humans, lest they be used for war against one another. The 10 Tenkuns no buki were either hidden or destroyed. And since then, they have become only legends or myths."

"And you're saying that you've not only found one of these legendary weapons, you can actually use it too." Sasuke interrupted thoughtfully, wondering if he could use one of these weapons as well.

"NO!" Naruto exclaimed. "They aren't to be used by people... or they shouldn't." Looking straight at an annoyed Sasuke, Naruto continued his explanation: "These weapons cannot be used by just anyone. They kill their user just as they kill their opponent. You don't understand Sasuke! They crave blood. These weapons are alive and they think. They have desire and they will use all forms of seduction to get what they want! No human can handle them without either dying, or going insane and killing thousands."

"Then how come *you* can handle it." Scoffed Sasuke angrily.

"They chose me." Naruto whispered sadly. "I am one of only a few people in the world that can handle them. It is a hereditary trait in my family, like a bloodline limit."

Sakura was about to interrupt the argument when Kakashi stepped in with a question of his own. "Why is it in your possession?"

Naruto smiled in a very self-condemning way. "Because it has been my mission to find, collect and learn about all ten Tenkun no buki.. for the last two years of my life."

Kakashi's eyes widened. "You mean all that time that you've been travelling with Jiraiya-sama is to find these damn things?!" When Naruto nodded slightly in acknowledgement, Kakashi was still confused. "Why?"

Naruto answered secretively: "Because it is my destiny."

A few days later, with Naruto slightly healed from his ordeal and able to travel, the group finally sets out to return home to Konoha.

On the day they decided to leave, the entire village had turned out to thank them. Inari, especially, started to cry and Naruto hugged him awkwardly with only one hand. Naruto then whispered into Inari's ear that his father would be proud. Inari smiled.

Once they have left, Tazuna asked one of the villagers if they could call the bridge "The Great Naruto Bridge." Watching as Naruto slowly but surely made his way unsteadily across the bridge, they agreed.

On their travels, Naruto sleepily mumbled that he's happy they're finally heading home. Kakashi smiled secretly, glad that Naruto was finally starting to call *Konoha* **home** .

(1) Sorry, influence of Neon Genesis Evangelion. ;;;

(2) Ellie's story will be explained later, maybe in the next chapter or after. It's a really sad story that explains why Naruto goes psycho sometimes when he encounters really evil people. So stay tune, this is actually very important.

(3) Teleportation jutsu is another jutsu that Naruto knows, but it is NOT taught by Jiraiya. This jutsu is actually a forbidden jutsu that is taught to Naruto by his mother's only living relative (which is his only relative left). Don't worry, I'll be introducing this original character later on during the Chuunin exam. Think of it as another mystery for you guys! Can't WAIT!!!

(4) Dragon Fire no jutsu, Sasuke used it against Orochimaru in book 6, Chapter 49

(5) Original jutsu, it translates to: "Lightning" "Water" "Blast" – I think you get the picture.

(6) Another original weapon, one of my infamous (or will be) Tenkun no buki. Translate to: "Silver Death Thread/String" or "Silver Stings of Death". Its power and effect will be explained later. It sort of looks like a wristband with lots of metallic threads revolved around it. I'm sorry I can't describe it better, I've actually got it drawn out already so if I ever get it uploaded, I'll give you guys the site name so you can see for yourself.

I'm soooooo sorry it took soooooo long to write, but you've got to admit, this is the longest chapter yet for my Naruto fic. And it's got a tonne of detail onto the fight scene, I hope you like it. It's hell to write though!! - Not to mention, I've been busy trying to re-edit all of my other works.

The next chapter (hopefully) will be out sooner than this one but it'll be a lot more light hearted and you won't be having many surprises, I just wanted to move the plot along a bit.

Well, keep on reviewing and motivate me!

Chapter 6

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Five: Ellie's Story!

Reply to my wonderful reviewers:

Jonathan Shim: I really don't mind you interrogating my work and picking up mistakes and stuff but **I WILL NOT ACCEPT YOUR CRITICISM OF MY BETA-READERS!!!** They are doing me a **FAVOUR** by helping me with my work, anything wrong with the final product is **MY** fault, **NOT THEIR'S!!! SO NEXT TIME YOU WANT TO CRITICISE MY WORK, AT LEAST GIVE SOME THOUGHT INTO HOW MUCH WORK GOES INTO IT!!!**

LiuKang: I would really appreciate it if you would help. I've only just realized how enormous this story could be if I really wanted an **END** to it. I would probably need new jutsu and help with establishing the plot line. So your help would be very much appreciated.

Lauren K: At the end of Chapter 5 when Kakashi is giving Naruto a short summary about what had happened since his collapse, it already stated that Zabuza died due to the severity of his injuries. He disappeared from then on because I found no excuse to keep him there, I only needed Haku alive. nn;;;

dfourthhorseman: Yah, I'm trying very hard to make Naruto slightly more social without losing his inherit conservatism. Yes, "Naruta" is

the name I'll be using for the female Naruto version from Sexy no Jutsu. Um.. in this chapter, there'll be less action but more emotion.

Sam: Thank you for your support!! As for the sword "Kusanagi" used by Orochimaru being one of the Tenkun no buki - actually, I *didn't plan* on making it one, but considering I currently have only 5 out of the 10 weapons planed, I guess it could be. The most important aspect is that I need to know **WHAT** it is capable of doing. nn If anybody knows then please tell me, all I've seen it do is cut people and fly directed by Orochimaru's Chakra. What do you think is its special abilities? And as for volunteering for being a proof reader, I might be needing help in the later future for plot development, I've already got 3 people helping me proof read, but Thank you anyway!

To: Devinj2000, Pyr00tje, Shinnotooni, insanechildfanfic, Kuroi Hikari, Dreamer, bubblytokki, RuByMoOn17, Gromph, DarkDemonMaster, Shadow Illusionist, EmptySanity (ccslover), DrazenFlames, Babowonsuni, Wormkaizer, SilverKnight7, EmeraldBlossom, Drownin' in my Tears: Thank you all soooo **GENEROUSLY** for your continual support and review. I read and appreciate every single one! nn

Nikkler & liemtenshi: You'll find out what destiny I have in store for Naruto much later in the story line when two of my OCs come into the story, so please be patient. nn

The-TempestT: Remember, I had Sakura undergo some *INTENSIVE* physical training exercises when Naruto was training her. I know it seems too short of a time to become that strong but I have it on good authority that if you **DO** physical training '*INTENSIVELY*' (as in around 8 to 10 hours a day), You actually build up a *LOT* of muscle structure pretty soon, but for the first week or so, you will be incredibly sore. So yeah, that's where I base my assumption from, I myself haven't gone through that though but I'll take my school sport instructor's word on it. nn;;;;

Kkoganei: I guess the "traveling to find special weapons" theory does clash with the "Naruto leaving for his own safety" theory, but

understand he stayed 'away' from Konoha for a very long time *due* to his mission of finding the Tenkun no bukis. As in, he first left Konoha due to his own safety reasons, but somehow was left with a mission by ' *someone* ' that he had to find the Tenkun no bukis. nn;;; I know it's confusing but bare with me, it'll make sense later. Basically, all I'm saying is that the third Hokage sent Naruto away with Jiraiya for his own safety. Along the way, Naruto met '*someone*' and was later ordered to find the weapons. However, he hasn't '*completed*' this mission yet when he returned to Konoha, so he too, is curious why he's back so early just to become a genin. The bloodline technique and other special stuff will also be explained much later when my OC come into the story. I wanted the OC to appear in the story from a critical point, after the fight with Orochimaru, SO PLEASE BE PATIENT!!!

Naito Kiseki: It depends on what you mean by "Naruto *will* die at the end of this story"... Everyone dies because no one lives forever, but I can't imagine how Naruto will die yet. And as for the part about the Tenkun no buki's side effects (killing its user), Naruto's bloodline limit (I guess you could call it that) neutralizes that effect. Not to mention, most of these weapons feed on "life energy", "Chakra", and or "Spiritual energy," all of which Naruto has an ABUNDANCE of due to the Kyuubi being sealed inside of him. So in effect, every time he uses the weapon, it sucks more of Kyuubi than Naruto. nn

Licht Sieger: Gomen! I hope you're not angry that I did something similar to your story. I swear I've had this weapon in my head for a damn long time, I just didn't know where to put it. However, thank you for your continual support and reviews!

Heh: Wah!!! How am I supposed to keep 2 different versions of the same chapters! But don't worry, for most of the rest of this story, I'll try to incorporate my original plot into it more so that it will be a new experience for ALL readers, not just the ones with Anime/Manga backgrounds. nn

Thu6666: Well, this OC does play a rather *BIG* part for the rest of the story, but she is only a supporting character for Naruto, always

manipulating what he does and stuff, so she will be a rather *major* character. I hope you don't mind. She actually doesn't *APPEAR* often but her influence on Naruto (especially) is massive. But I will do my very best to keep the plot as original and interesting as possible so you're not put off by my OC.

Loo Luu: You won't get to find out about Naruto's bloodline limit for a while yet, but "Ellie's story" will be coming up in this chapter. Please don't kill me though, I warned you all it would be a sad one! As I said to Sam before hand, I might need more help with Plot development because I already have 3 people helping me proof read. nn Thank you for the offer and I'll keep it in mind.

Hitomi No Ryu: You really would like the 'weasel in a person' idea, don't you? nn;;; I'll keep that in mind but my original character won't have a demon in them, sorry to disappoint. nn

Naruto OOC. PG-13. Okay! MAJOR change in ATMOSPHERE for Naruto compared to all other chapters. Naruto has been living in a more stable lifestyle for a while now and is already beginning to trust more people, so it would seem normal for him to become less rigid and anti-social. Though still conservative, Naruto has learnt to speak out more, especially to those he trusts (Haku, Kakashi, Sakura and even Sasuke). Oh, please don't feel confused if the Naruto that appears here seem a bit different from all the rest of the Chapters, it's because he has spent so much time in the company of others that he has started to lose his mask a little. That's all. nn

Um... oh yeah, first part of this chapter will be sad due to the retelling of "Ellie's" story but the second half will be funny and up-beat due to the introduction of Konohamaru. I know those two themes (sad & happy) doesn't seem to go together at all, so if it seems completely unattainable, my only excuse is that I wanted to get these two parts out of the way for the rest of the plot. nn I hope you guys don't mind.

Warning: VIOLENCE, BLOOD, GORE, ANGST, SAD,... (not on the main characters, but none the less you HAVE been warned)

Help needed: Of the tenkun no buki, only 5 have been designed
nn;;;, so I'm looking for anyone who has ideas as to what the other
five are. It can be some of the weapons already used in Naruto
(Kusanagi) or it could be totally original, but the most important
aspect to include is its **EFFECTS** - what can it do (damage wise for
both the user and the opponent, any elemental effects and what is its
nature). I'm asking about the nature of the weapon because there is
a secret behind the creation of these Tenkun no buki that let them
have a personality of their own. Remember, these things are **ALIVE**
!! And they **THINK** !!

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 5

After three weeks since the groups' return to Konoha, life seemed to
revert back to its original stasis of boring missions and dull events.
Due to his severe injuries, Naruto was unable to use his right hand at
all. As a result, he was taken off the 'active' list, and put on the
'injured' list of currently available Ninjas for work, which meant he did
not have to participate in tedious D rank missions that Team 7 still
had to complete on a daily basis. However, that also meant that his
days were spent bored out of his mind with nothing to do. This then
led to the strengthening of his relationship with their ex-enemy,
Haku. The mutual respect shared between the two had grown into a
close-knit friendship where by they share most (if not all) of their
secrets with one another.

Haku had moved in with Naruto and Jiraiya due to the shortage of
free apartments currently in Konoha. Naruto didn't mind, Jiraiya was
not even home most of the time, and the third Hokage wanted to
give Haku a month of probation to test his loyalties. It was easy for
Haku to be registered as one of Konoha's Chunins since the only

requirement was that he must prove his loyalty to the protection of Konoha and to follow the Hokage's orders. Since Haku had nowhere else to turn to (with Zabuza dead and considered a Missing Nin in the Mist), he completely agreed to abide by these conditions. After the registration, Haku opted to become a Medic Nin and was forced to undergo the special training for becoming Medic Nins. Needless to say, he was a genius and picked up the art quickly. The only downside was that he had to wear those ridiculous outfits if he were to officially attend to patients; Naruto had never stopped teasing him about it.

It was during one of these boring days when Haku had a day off that he helped Naruto clean up and decorate his room. It wasn't that the room was dirty or messy per say, it's just that Naruto had very plain tastes and his room was practically empty. Except for a futon on the floor, the only other furniture in the room was a closet and a table (with no chair). Haku's eye twitched at the uninhabitable blandness of Naruto's room. So, he decided that they *had* to paint the walls of the room a different color from the original pale white, as well as buy several more furniture to give the room some life. Completely bored, Naruto complied to help since it was *his* room being decorated.

Firstly, they had cleared the room of all objects (three furniture's) to get the painting done as soon as possible, then they opted to wait for the paint to dry while they shopped around for other decorative features to be placed in the room later. However, Haku was just helping Naruto carry the closet out when one side compartment of the closet opened and a small wooden box fell out of it. The two of them managed to get the heavy closet out of the room and went back to search for the dropped box. Upon seeing the old and worn box, Naruto froze in mid-step.

Haku, curious as to what made Naruto suddenly froze, asked: "Naruto? What's wrong?" Seeing Naruto's gaze firmly locked onto the box without pause, Haku looked back at the inconspicuous box with a confused expression. He walked towards it and knelt down, picking it up as he continued to look it over. It was a small, old

wooden jewelry box. Not sure why Naruto owned one of these, Haku asked curiously. "What's in it?"

Naruto blinked, as if coming out of a trance. He picked it up from Haku, and moved towards his bed in silence. Haku, picking up the silent hint from his friend, followed him and sat next to the blonde boy on the futon. Finally, Naruto spoke. "They are gifts... from the past." With that strange answer, he slowly opened the box.

Inside, there were a variety of items that both seemed old and worn, yet, they were all kept in perfect condition. There was a small Ninja-like scroll, with Naruto's name written on top of it in script like fashion. A few dried flowers all bunched together using an old rubber band. They seems to be a variety of *Anthemis tinctorial* (1)..thought Haku, as he remembered the list of wild flowers that he had seen through out his life. Another item within the box was a sort of rope-like object with a deep green jade amulet attached to it. All were curious objects but Haku waited for Naruto to gather his thoughts before he was ready to explain the history of each of the items.

Naruto slowly and gently picked up the first item, the scroll, as if it would disintegrate if he held it too tightly. "This", he indicated the small scroll, "is the only thing my father left me.." Haku blinked, and his mouth hung open slightly in shock. "I never knew it was his, all I have ever known was that it had been with me since a very long time ago..." Sighing slightly. "When I packed up to leave Konoha six years ago, I found it again. At first, I wanted to dump it but I guess... since I have so little belongings in the first place, I didn't want to lose something of my past, so I kept it... The next time I played with it, Jiraiya saw me, and he was the one who told me that my father left this for me just before he died."

Shaking his head as if to ward off the impending memories, Naruto continued. "I thought I was given the world..." Smiling slightly, "You see, I could never open the stupid scroll in the first place. Jiraiya said that the Yondaime had put some kind of Chakra seal on it that is semi-permanent. The seal is supposed to last until my 18th birthday before it disintegrates, and finally letting me read what is written

inside. How my father managed to put this type of seal on it, I don't know, but since then, I've kept it as safe as possible."

Moving on to the next item, the rope with a jade amulet. Naruto reverently picked up the object and looked at it with slight awe in his eyes. "This... belonged to my mother."

Haku looked at Naruto, stunned, but just had to ask: "I thought you never knew your mother?"

Naruto shook his head. "No.. I never did. She died during my birth." Putting the piece delicately down, back into the box. "She was a diplomat,.. or a representative, something like that from another country." Haku blinked again, and Naruto smirked at his confused expression. "I may not know her, but I've meet some people who have." Continuing on with his story, Naruto said: "She came to Konoha around 15 years ago I think, and soon fell in love with my dad... or at least that's what I've heard, from Jiraiya and from the third Hokage..." Naruto's smile faded. "It was a forbidden relationship and they never did get married officially.. She stayed here illegally, without the permission of her countries' leader."

Haku could just barely hear Naruto's whispered words. "You know.. how can a person miss someone they've never met before?" (2) Haku fought back his own tears as his own memories cascaded into his mind. Naruto, on the other hand, didn't cry or flinch, he just looked on sadly. For a long time, the two remained silent, that was, until Naruto turned to ask Haku. "What's it like? ... Having a family I mean.."

Haku gave him a very sad smile. "I was happy. My parents weren't rich but we lived a simply lifestyle and it suited us just fine." Pausing to gather his thoughts, Haku continued. "They cared for me very much, and I loved them back. They took care of me when I was sick, sang me to sleep when I had nightmares, and always.. always looked out to protect me in any way..." Loosing the battle against his emotions, a tear ran down Haku's pale face.

Naruto pulled slightly away from Haku, not lifting his head to face him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't bring all that up."

Haku shook his head and wiped away the tears. "No... It's okay. It was good... to remember the happier times.." Looking back at Naruto, who still hadn't turned to look back at him, Haku sighed. "I just can't imagine what it's like... living... never knowing what your parents were like at all, never knowing who you are... and never having anyone to have cared..." Taking a deep breath, Haku continued. "I think, you're stronger than me, Naruto... in that respect."

Naruto shook his head but refused to look up. "No.. I don't feel the pain of losing someone close because I've never known who they were in the first place. I didn't feel the loss because I'm not sure exactly **what** I have lost... I admire you, Haku.. to be able to give your heart out again when you have felt the pain of loss and then lost it again. To be able to pick up a shattered heart and mend it time and time again, ... that takes true strength."

Haku smiled at Naruto's encouragement but knowing nothing he could say would change Naruto's opinions on his own weaknesses. Naruto is just like that. He can never take compliments from other people and yet he is always so difficult to impress in the first place. Haku sighed ironically but decided to change the subject. "What about the flowers?" He asked gently, but to his surprise, Naruto fell into a deeper depression at the mention of the flowers.

If it was possible, the mood in the room plummeted into a cold atmosphere. A long pause ensued in which no one moved, Haku didn't because he didn't know what kind of landmine he had just put himself into with that statement of his, and Naruto because he's still trying to collect himself emotionally. Finally, attempting to lighten the mood (if at all possible), Haku broached the subject lightly. "You don't have to tell me, Naruto, if you don't want to."

Naruto finally reacted by shaking his head. "No... it's just that this story is even worse than the one of my parents." He paused. "I told

you before I don't seem to feel the same pain as you and Sasuke when it comes to the lost of my parents, mainly because I've never known them.. So this pain comes in the form of a black hole, one that will never be filled but it doesn't engulf me, it just... stays the same size all the time.. The first time I have ever lost someone close..." Picking up the flowers, Naruto gazed at them sadly. "was when I met Ellie."

"Ellie?" Asked Haku, softly.

Blank eyes stared at the flowers as if Naruto himself is somewhere else, probably reliving his nightmare. "It was the first time I had killed someone too."

Haku's eyes widened in suspicion: "You didn't..." pausing in slight apprehension, "kill her, did you?" Haku whispered.

Naruto shook his head as Haku visibly sighed in relief. He had been afraid that Naruto had done the same thing he did - killing someone dear to them, because of their own hysteria and awakened powers.

Swallowing his own apprehension, Naruto began the story of Ellie. "Ellie was born blind." Shaking his head, Naruto restarted his story. "Almost three years ago, when I lived in one of the villages on the borders of the Earth country, I met up with a 5 years old, blind girl.. selling flowers on the street corner.. Jiraiya had left me for two weeks alone because he had to do some information gathering or what ever business he had, and I was bored.. so I spent some time talking to Ellie and she became my first real friend. She was 5 and I had just turned 9 so I was rather protective of her, always helping her against the local bullies and all." Naruto smiled self-depressingly. "She was poor, her father was an alcoholic and a gambler, so she was trying to earn enough money to pay off his debt as well as earn some extra to find a doctor to heal her eyes... But she could only sell flowers!" Naruto laughed at the irony, hiding his face behind his hands as he leaned forward trying desperately to control his raging emotions.

His soft and almost broken voice continued. "I tried to heal her eyes, but she was born with the blindness so I couldn't do anything with my Chakra. She wanted to see how beautiful the world was, she wanted to see the world described by her mother before the women had died almost a year prior, all those colors and wild flowers.. I wanted to help her so much.. Compared to her, my pain seemed inconsequential."

"But.. one day, she didn't come to sell flowers anymore. She just wasn't there when I visited her at that particular street corner. I went again and again, day after day, and I started becoming worried. She was my only friend after all. I asked around for her house and finally found it." Naruto's body shuddered slightly as the memories continued to bombard him.

Haku placed a firm hand onto Naruto's shoulder as a show of support and anchor. "And?" Naruto had to let this out somehow, he needed to let go of it and Haku made sure that today was the day.

Slightly stumbling with the words, Naruto continued. "Her father was there... drunk... and crying.... I demanded to know... to know where Ellie had disappeared to. Did you know what he said?" For the first time in the conversation, Naruto looked up at Haku, and Haku was shocked at the amount of anguish being displayed right there in Naruto's ever-blue eyes. Shivering, Haku shook his head. "He sold her as a slave." Naruto spoke calmly.

Haku's eyes widened to their maximum capacity but managed to stop his shuddering and tried to gather himself under control soon after. GOD! I have heard from Zabuza that there are still places in the world where people practice slavery but I hadn't encountered any yet. Sure, I've seen a lot of bad places, poor and shady, but nothing.. nothing like this... Taking a deep calming breath, Haku turned to look at Naruto again, determined to help the smaller boy through his ordeal, if only in remembering it. Squeezing Naruto's shoulder as a sign that he was still there, Haku whispered softly: "I'm so sorry."

"That's not the worst of it yet." Answered Naruto in a whisper of his own. Haku nodded in comprehension and held onto Naruto's shoulder firmly as he continued with the rest of the story. "I was so angry at the man that I almost killed him there and then. I demanded to know whom he had sold his own daughter to, and found out that it was the same gang that the man had owed money to. So I went looking for Ellie, hoping that I wasn't too late, hoping that I could save her. I found them alright, and found Ellie too..." Naruto began shuddering and dry sobbing as the tears just refuse to come, no matter how painful it was to relive the nightmare.

"I found her battered and broken body in a pit they've dug for all their trash..." The silence that hung from that statement continued for a long while before any of them could swallow the truth. "And I just lost it." Naruto finally said. "I **foxed** out."(3)

Haku closed his eyes in understanding, knowing that Naruto's term of " *foxed out* " meant that he had given in to the Nine tails hunger for death and destruction. I lost control of my powers when I watched my father kill my own mother. I panicked and in my fear, had caused the death of my own father... Naruto lost control of himself due to anger... and hate... He must have been completely overwhelmed by grief and so much rage... that he had killed his first person...

"I killed them all... every last one." Confirmed Naruto, with his head buried into his own hands, body shivering.

Both boys stayed in silence, taking comfort from one another for a long while.

"When I finally came to.. I was covered in blood... Everything... everything was splattered with so much blood. Every one of those Gang members was dead... I just felt numb. I carried Ellie's body back home... just to find her father had hanged himself in guilt... So I buried them in a field of white flowers. And then I just sat and didn't move..." Naruto paused and shut his eyes in concentration. "I don't know how long I just waited there... How many days? I just don't know... Finally, Jiraiya came for me... Soon, we left that village and

never returned... I've dried those flowers that I had bought from Ellie and have kept them safe ever since..." Naruto concluded his story.

For the first time, Haku understood why Naruto always reacted in a certain way towards people. Haku had accepted Naruto as a carrier of a demon and had believed that it was the reason why Naruto always shy away from more human contact. But that wasn't right, not completely; it was because of Ellie. The first friend he had ever had, and he wasn't even strong enough to help or protect her. He's keeping everyone away so that he **doesn't** feel like he needed to help them, so that he **doesn't** get attached to them at all. If you believe that you couldn't even save one person, how can you believe that you are strong enough to save everyone? Naruto is too kind... perhaps even more than me.

Naruto had helped Haku forgive himself for unconsciously killing his own parents, but Naruto himself, had not forgiven himself for being unable to save Ellie. Is that why you strive to become stronger? Even though you don't want to become a Ninja!? To become strong enough that you won't regret ever being helpless again, for being too late. Haku gave Naruto a final squeeze for support and then let go of the blonde boy completely, watching his friend carefully as Naruto slowly wiped his face of sweat .

Haku had often questioned himself why he and Naruto seem to get along so well, more so than with Sakura and Sasuke. It wasn't just because they live in the same apartment or see each other every day. It was because they share similar pains and tragic pasts. In a sense, both of them were responsible for their parent's death indirectly so they both had accepted each other's flaws - Haku, because he had killed his own father in a fit of panic; and Naruto for baring the demon responsible for his father's death. Today, Haku had discovered something else that was similarly shared between them - their first killing experience.

For the rest of the day, the two boys rested and just didn't have it in them to continue with the room renovation. There will be time tomorrow for that. For now, both are too raw with emotion and just

didn't have the strength to do anything. They slept through the day and the night in their emotionally exhausted state but satisfied that from now on, they no longer had to face their demons on their own. Haku had Naruto to back him up and Naruto, in turn, will have Haku's support to keep him sane.

A few days later, both boys had recovered from their emotional upheavals and had finally completed the room renovation. Today however, Haku needed to work so Naruto was left to his own boredom because he still couldn't participate in missions yet. He had healed enough to practice some jutsus, but not enough for doing the more powerful seals, unless he wanted to cause further damage to his right hand and arm.

So there he was, strolling down a street when suddenly, a kid turned the corner and ran in the opposite way to him. The boy of around eight tripped over his *own* feet just before reaching Naruto. Naruto lifted one delicate eyebrow at what an amusing sight this boy presented, tripping over himself.

The child suddenly reacted in retaliation, pointing his finger at Naruto. "Hey! YOU! You're the one who purposely tripped me, aren't you!?"

Naruto lifted his other eyebrow in surprise. "Excuse me..." Naruto replied.

"I know you did something!" The boy exclaimed. "Do you know WHO I am?! I'm the third Hokage's grandson, Konohamaru-sama! Now, hurry up and apologise to me or else I won't forgive you!" Demanded the newly introduced Konohamaru as he expected Naruto to immediately bow to him in respect.

Naruto's eyes narrowed in suppressed anger. Who the hell does he think he is, ordering people like that! It's his OWN damn fault for tripping his OWN bloody FEET!!

To the boy's surprise however, Naruto didn't even bat an eye towards him and continued on his walk without offering a word. When he passed Konohamaru though, Naruto shifted his right leg quickly and intentionally tripped Konohamaru for real this time. Hearing the thump of the boy hitting the ground as well as the boy's yelp of pain, Naruto smiled as he walked away from the scene looking as innocent as possible, feeling very satisfied with himself.

A few hours later found Naruto standing alone at the Hero's Memorial stone. He comes here often, at least once daily to honour his father. To Naruto, this place was probably the closest place where he would ever get towards his father, other than the man's graves.

Suddenly, Naruto felt as if he was being watched. He sneaked a peek behind him and found a weird square box that was suppose to be patterned to look like a rock, though a box none the less with two holes at the front. Smiling as he realized that the boy from before had followed him, Naruto decided to have some fun and test these intruders. He took two steps to the right; the box followed him. Naruto then took two steps to the left; the box again followed his movements.

After a while of contemplation, Naruto decided to confront the brats hiding underneath the box. He turned around completely, pointing at the suspicious box and says: "What do you want?"

Um.. the normal intro of the "Konohamaru Corps!" so for those of you not interested, SKIP AHEAD!

(4) "Impressive. I should have expected that from the man whom I have high hopes for." The box replied and suddenly exploded, releasing three different coloured smoke before clearing and revealing the three kids.

"Hey, you used too much gunpowder." Coughed Konohamaru as he spoke with his other team mates. Naruto raised his eyebrows again.

After picking themselves off the floor, the three kids struck poses in grand posture.

"The one who possesses the sex appeal of an adult, and the female ninja from the senior group, Moegi." Announced the girl as she twirled around and picked a stance.

"The one who loves dividing numbers, Udon." Proclaimed the slightly droopy eyed boy with snot hanging out of his nose, also making a pose.

"The villages' number one genius ninja, Konohamaru!" yelled the most energetic one out of the lot.

"The three of us make the Konohamaru Corps!" the three joined together in chorus and Naruto yawned in boredom.

RETURN TO READ... nn

Picking his ear with a finger, Naruto took a relaxed stance and didn't even acknowledge the kids. "Yeah, what'ya want?"

Konohamaru growled in irritation, but Moegi stepped up to Naruto and asked in a quiet voice: "Is it true what they say about you?"

Naruto glanced at her puppy dog eyes and sighed. "What'd they say about me?"

"That you're really Really strong?" Moegi's mouth quivered and her puppy dog eyes got bigger.

Naruto squirmed under her scrutiny. "Sort of."

"Yay! See Konohamaru. I WAS RIGHT!!!" yelled Moegi, smirking at Konohamaru.

Konohamaru grumbled as he walked towards Naruto. "Hey. I'll let you be our boss! In exchange, teach me something that will defeat my Grandpa!"

Naruto raised both his eyebrows in astonishment. "Excuse me."

"You heard me! I want you to teach me something that will defeat my GRANDPA!" Naruto thought it over for a moment, imagining the Hokage's face as his own grandson performing the Oiroke no Jutsu (Sexy no jutsu) that almost rendered the Hokage unconscious with blood loss. Naruto immediately had to smother his chuckle before he breaks out into an all out laugh. This is such a *good* opportunity!

Looking back at Konohamaru's hopeful eyes, Naruto answered. "Alright. But remember, this ain't a picnic." Squatting close to Konohamaru, Naruto made it look as if he was telling the boy a secret. "The jutsu I'll be teaching is a high level jutsu that only I know and it can defeat any man." Konohamaru nodded vigorously as if the world had been handed out to him.

Eventually, Naruto led Konohamaru deeper into the forest to train him in the use the Oiroke no jutsu (Sexy no Jutsu). For the rest of the day, they stayed there and Naruto had to smother his laughter so many times during Konohamaru's practice, it was giving him a stomach ache.

After practicing for four hours, Naruto decided to give Konohamaru a rest. "By the way, why are you after your grandpa?" Naruto asked curiously.

SKIP IF YOU ALREADY KNOW IT!

"Grandpa gave me the name Konohamaru. I'm named after the village. But even though everyone is use to that name here, nobody ever calls me that. Whenever everyone sees me or calls me, all they see is the Hokage's grandson. Nobody sees me as me, I'm sick of that. That's why I want the Hokage name so much." Answered Konohamaru seriously.

RETURN TO READ!!

Naruto blinked. He didn't believe that Konohamaru would ever be so passionate about something so serious. After he thought about it a bit more, Naruto realized that they were similar. Konohamaru is the grandson of the third Hokage and no one acknowledged him as him, instead they see him as simply the Hokage's grandson. He himself is the son of the fourth Hokage and no one acknowledged him as him, mainly because 1) they don't know that he is the fourth Hokage's son and 2) they only see him as the demon fox. I can understand what a burden that name must be and how much it hurts when you are seen but what the other people actually see isn't you at all. It's something else entirely.

"The Hokage name isn't so easy that any brat could take it." Naruto explained almost subconsciously.

"WHAT?!" Konohamaru cried in indignation, but Naruto was just as confused by what he had said and concentrated on his previous train of thought.

Yes, that's right. Being the Hokage isn't easy at all. Naruto thought sadly. My father sacrificed himself for the village. He sacrificed **me**, his own flesh and blood, for this village. Not everyone can make that kind of sacrifice or that kind of decision. That's why he was a Hokage, a Hero. He bares the responsibility of Konoha's protection and prosperity, no matter what the cost to himself and his family. The village always comes first!

[FLASHBACK] UM.... Sometime before hand, not sure when...

"Why don't you aim for the Hokage title?" Haku asked genuinely.

"WHAT?!" Naruto sputtered.

Haku giggled at his response but continued with his line of thinking. "If you're so obsessed about finding out why your father would give up your life as well as his own for this village, as his title of Hokage dictates. Why not follow his path right to the very end and become Hokage yourself? In that sense, you will most definitely see what he

sees, feel what he feels, and understand his reasoning better. Instead of looking at it from an outsider's point of view, take it straight from his point of view."

*"But I'm **NOT** my father, Haku." Naruto argued.*

"So! Doesn't mean you can't take the same path. And anyway, that will prove to the villagers here once and for all, that you are a great ninja, not just the carrier of the demon fox, but a real person. Force them to acknowledge your existence, make them see the truth that they have been hiding from all this time." Haku urged.

"But they won't change their minds about me, Haku! Don't you understand? It's too late for any reconciliation. I'm already very happy over the fact that they haven't sent any more murder attempts on my life, let alone force them to continue seeing the face that they hated so much. I'm tired of fighting this, Haku. I just want to let it go." Naruto said tiredly.

*"Now, that is exactly your problem. You're too afraid to try. Naruto, don't you get it? If you never try to change or confront the problem head on, nothing will change and you'll be forever unsatisfied. I for one, was told by Zabuza-san that I have great potential, and that I'll be able to do what ever I want. And you were the one that told me to follow my own path of the Shinobi, not to become just another tool of war. You taught me how to develop my own dreams and follow my own way without regrets. You gave me that freedom and now you're telling me **you** can't break out of **yours** . That's bullshit and you know it!" Haku insisted.*

Naruto sighed and kept quiet while Haku continued to badger him. "Please Naruto. Just think it over. It may be your only chance to change all these people's opinions of you. It will be your chance to completely eradicate your fear of people, by forcing yourself to face them head on. Stop running away and follow the path that your own father had set out for you."

Naruto gazed at Haku steadily. "How do you know that my father would want me to become a Hokage, like him?"

Haku smiled. "I don't. But I know that if you do, he'll be very proud of you."

[END FLASHBACK]

Looking back at Konohamaru's determined face made Naruto realise he too, like Konohamaru, should fight for recognition, not just sit idly by and wait for someone to do the work for them. Haku was right. I am being a coward. Thank you Konohamaru. It's your words that gave me my absolution.

Naruto smiled at Konohamaru and told him straight. "The title of Hokage, if you want that name so much, then..."

"Then what!?" Demanded Konohamaru.

"Then defeat me first because I want it just as bad as you!" Naruto smirked.

"Uh?" Konohamaru lost his indignant expression immediately and displayed a confused and shocked face instead.

"I have found you!" came a voice from up in a tree.

Damn, I was so focused on my own thoughts that I didn't even realize I had company! Naruto silently chided himself as he looked up towards the man in dark blue ninja attire and wearing dark sunglasses. Seeing the cold and ruthless eyes that gazed back at him (through the sunglasses), Naruto's anger flared. DAMN THEM! DAMN THEM AND THEIR COLD ATTITUDES!! I'LL SHOW THEM ALL!! Naruto thought angrily.

Jumping down, the man, probably Konohamaru's sensei replied. "Come now, young master. Let's go home." Geese. Konohamaru

was right when he said all they saw was his grandfather's image and not his real name. Naruto felt sorry for the boy.

"NO! I'm going to defeat Grandpa and get the Hokage name now!" Yelled Konohamaru as he started performing the Oiroke no Jutsu (Sexy no jutsu).

Naruto ignored the man's continual words about what a Hokage should be like. From what I've heard from the pervert Sennin, my father, the famous fourth Hokage was nothing like what this man's description of a Hokage should be.

It's true! From Jiraiya's earliest memories, the Yondaime was actually a prankster and a lazy bum in his youth. A real genius, but a prankster none the less, and it took him a while to accept responsibility. (5) The Yondaime would use any and every chance he gets to rest and relax and he disliked stressing over state issues. Sure, when it comes to crunch time, the Yondaime always found a solution to the problem at hand, but it doesn't change the fact that a lot of people actually view the Yondaime as the most lazy one out of all the Hokages of Konoha. Well, that was Jiraiya's description anyway.

The oiroke no jutsu (sexy no jutsu) performed by Konohamaru did nothing else except enrage his teacher and the man started sputtering about 'what a vulgar skill it was' and such. Naruto lost his patience as the man continued to insult his special skill. He decided to performed the next level of Oiroke no jutsu to punish the man, called the Harem no jutsu. This jutsu was specifically created to cater for the likes of Jiraiya, it is probably the most powerful of its kind and will most definitely defeat that Konohamaru's teacher. Naruto smirked in satisfaction.

As the 20 naked Naruta's take turns seducing the man, it was no surprise to Naruto that the man eventually spurted out a lot of blood from his nose and was rendered unconscious by the move. The bunshins all disappeared then leaving a very satisfied Naruto behind.

"Damn it! I couldn't even defeat my own tutor! I really want a name that people will acknowledge!! But why...!!" Yelled Konohamaru continuously, which drew out both Moegi and Udon from outside the forest, running towards them to see what the fuss was about. Naruto decided to shut the boy up by hitting Konohamaru's head in irritation.

"It's not that easy, *STUPID* ! This is the **HOKAGE** name we're talking about here. The name of the greatest ninja in this entire village! Do you really think people will give you that name just because you want it bad enough?! You moron! You have to work *DAMN* hard to make the people you want to acknowledge you! If you truly want that name, then you're gonna have to work for it. So you better prepare yourself, Konohamaru." Said Naruto seriously as he turned around, preparing to leave the group.

Konohamaru tilted his head in confusion. "Prepare for what!?"

"If you want it that badly, the name of Hokage I mean. Then there ain't going to **BE** any shortcuts. You're gonna have to **EARN** it just like everyone else. Prove you deserve the name through your hard work. That's the only way you'll succeed." Naruto said as he continued to walk away.

Konohamaru blinked in understanding and he suddenly remembered what Naruto had told him before hand. "Bah! Stop lecturing me, you jerk! You're no longer my boss anymore! From now on, Naruto-niichan! We're rivals!! Rivals for the name of Hokage!!" yelled Konohamaru and Naruto waved his left hand behind him in acknowledgement.

"I'll be looking forward to it, Konohamaru." Were the last words from Naruto's lips as he left The Konohamaru Corps.

For the rest of the day, Naruto had a silly little smile on his face. It disturbed all the people around him because they all knew that Naruto wasn't the kind of guy that would smile often, if at all. It took Haku several tries to get Naruto to talk but when he finally told him

that he had decided to aim all the way to become Hokage, Haku just grinned at him in support.

Yes! Now, I have a dream! My dream is to become Hokage, someday! Are you proud of me, Father? Are you smiling up there in heaven, glad that I've chosen this path? I won't runaway anymore, Father. I won't and I promise you, I will become a proud ninja!

(1) I randomly picked a flower from my gardening book. It's a type of flower that is golden/yellow in colour, looks sort of like a sunflower only smaller, with its central piece a bright gold surrounded by light yellow petals; it only blooms during summer or spring.

(2) Some of you may notice this but this line is VERY similar to one written in Bloodlines , another Naruto fic. I know the idea isn't mine but I hope no one minds if I kinda borrow it. That's why I've gotto state it here that the idea ISN'T MINE.

(3) "Foxed out", another term borrowed from another Naruto fic... I just can't remember which one. nn;;; Well, the term ISN'T MINE so don't sue me. It just basically means that for an instant, Naruto was no longer in control of his body - Kyuubi is. He doesn't exactly change back into a fox form, just with the whiskers, the claws and red eyes. If Naruto's anger rose to Kyuubi's level, it's very easy for Naruto to "fox out" and let Kyuubi out for a bit of fun. But this usually only lasts an instant (the most less than a minute). However, the destruction that can be caused within that time frame is MASSIVE.

(4) I know that anyone who have watched the Anime will know about the ridiculous poses that the kids put themselves into, but I can't help it! nn I just find it funny and had to find a way to incorporate this into the story somehow. For those of you who don't want to read this part, you may skip it, but I'm most definitely NOT taking it away. This chapter needed some humour. With the other chapters, the hum our is brought through by having Naruto and Jiraiya at the some place, same time, but in this one, I really wanted to have that innocent display by the kids that border on stupidity. nn

(5) Another influence from Bloodlines . I really like the characterization of Arashi Kazama (Yondaime) in Bloodlines , so I kinda borrowed part of his personality. But believe me when I say that the Yondaime in this story isn't exactly like that of Bloodlines . Similar yes, but not exactly! I hope the author of Bloodlines isn't furious at me for taking so many ideas from his wonderful story.

Some questions - Need help:

Q1) As said before: I've only done 5 out of the 10 Tenkun no bukis, if anyone has any ideas, I'll try to incorporate them into the story somehow.

Q2) Do you guys want me to rewrite scenes within the story where Naruto doesn't play a big role or is unconscious during the time (such as when Sakura had to fight the Sound Nins by herself when Naruto & Sasuke are passed out; or any of the Preliminary Chuunin Exam battles that does not involve Naruto...). I admit I'd prefer to leave them as they are (since that leaves me with less work and less retelling of the story), but I'm **also tempted** to change them into what ever I want! nn;;; I'm always contradicting myself like that... nn;;;

Anyway. Thank you ALL for sticking with this story for 6 whole chapters (including the prologue) and Thank you all again for the supportive reviews! I DO read ALL the reviews and they really DO help encourage me to work harder. Please keep on pushing me if you think I've been slacking off; I'm a lazy person at heart so I need that push. nn;;;

From your humble Authoress

Karrafear. nn

Chapter 7

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Six: Chuunin Exam Part 1!!!

Replies to my wonderful reviewers: **Spoilers in some of the replies...**

Rash: Actually, all the Tenkun no bukis have their own absolute defences, not just one, so Thank you for your suggestion, I think I can incorporate that idea into all the Tenkun no bukis as part of their format, not just one dedicated to them. As for the blade idea, yeah, I've already got one for the Tenkun no buki. nn;;; But the SCYTHE... wow.. why didn't I think of that... Oo. I'll see what I can do with a scythe! Arigato for your support and your ideas!

FuTebOL LuVA: Gomen on all the errors... My subconscious mind don't pick up on things like that... xx;;; I appreciate all the constructive criticism, don't worry about that but it'll still take me some time to get all this stuff into my thick head. TT Anyway, great minds think alike - I've already got a sword-like weapon planned out in the original Tenkun no bukis, and it does suck Chakra, but more than that, it sucks life itself. So Thank you for your suggestion and be patient to see the debut for the "Yurei no ken"!

Malachi: Thank you for your review. I'll see what I can do with the parts that Naruto were either subconscious or don't play a big part. Thanks!

To: Aznkendoboy, babowonsuni, SilverKnight7, insanechildfanfic, sailor omega?white valkerie, Devinj2000, RuByMoOn17, Shadow Eclipse, EmptySanity, DrazenFlames, hmr: THANK YOU EVERYONE FOR YOUR CONTINUAL SUPPORT AND REVIEWS!!!

Ashes: Yes... I know you vote for "Reason to Trust"! nn Unfortunately, I've kinda changed this Story's title a bit. You see, I only just realised HOW BLOODY LONG this story is going to be, so I've sort of broken it up into several sections and I've just named the whole thing "The Faith Arc", and this first part/section is just called "Faith in Humanity". So far, I've planned for 2 other sections, but not much has actually been written in them yet. nn Oh well, I'll deal with it when I get there... nn;;

Dfourthhorseman: I agree, Ellie's story was sad.. And I just love having Haku and Naruto as best friends as well. My God! You read my mind! nn I've already gotten it planed that Naruto could do Fox summoning, but it won't be coming up until later in the series, so be patient! Chuunin Exam BEGIN!!!

Neotonix: I'm trying to write more, but I'm very busy now that school started... TT And about that idea of a Tenkun no buki actually having the ability to copy an Advance Bloodline technique... it's certainly something to think about, but I've always just wanted the Tenkun no buki to be weapons that enhance the user's original abilities, not to let them cheat by copying other people's abilities. And as for the other (older) ideas, I've already got a few Tenkun no bukis doing the things you've suggested (control of lost spirits, etc.), but thank you for the idea anyway. Maybe I can use that "copy bloodline technique idea" as something else instead. nn

Insanity: COOL IDEAS. I've already got something to do with Phoenix fires and stuff, that idea is already in the pre-production process, but the Mask of Darkness will certainly give me more ideas. Damn... now I wish there's going to be more than just 10 Tenkun no buki (I've already got 7 on the drawing board). Thank you very much for your continual support and reviews!

Hanachan: I didn't want to state any specific changes when it came to Naruto's looks and physical appearance, because I wanted to give you guys the freedom to imagine what he'd be like now. Not to mention, I've got no idea what he should look like either... I know he'll probably *grow* up to look a lot like the fourth, but until then... heh.. your guess is as good as mine. nn;;;

Kuroi Kistune: I know how you feel about all those good stories that you just want to keep on reading but there isn't any left to read.. nn;;; I'm really doing the best I can here. And yes, I've decided to have Sam and Loon Luu to help me with more beta reading as well as my other beta reader X2DarkLord. nn Thank you for your support and review!

Hitomi No Ryu: Arigato! That is a pretty good idea. I'll see what I can do with it. Hm.. I might not make its original form to be a sword, because I've already got one planned, but it could very well be a whip that looks slightly odd. Thank you for the suggestion as well as your continual support and reviews.

EARENTIL: Thank you for your review. I think I will be doing exactly that! I don't want my Naruto to loose that easily against Orochimaru either, but considering Orochimaru *is* one of the Legendary three, even this Naruto won't be able to defeat him. Yes, Naruto has learnt a lot from Jiraiya, but I wouldn't say he and Jiraiya are at the same ability. Naruto is still young and he still has a lot to learn. nn Gives me more to do too!

Aradow: Thank you for your review. Yeah, I know I've got problems with tenses, and I do try to make sure I stick to one or the other, but sometimes, my brain just doesn't pick it up. nn;;; Um.. as for the 6 year old comment thing, well... I've always thought that if Naruto hadn't grown up completely without anyone's acknowledgement, he'd probably turn out a lot nicer and smarter than any of the kids. He's a lot more innocent in my story at the beginning and is only starting to realise that if he wanted to get anywhere in this world, he can only rely on himself, so he kind of pushed himself into observing other's from an outside point of view and do individual studies to

maybe try and impress someone with his intelligence. I hope that makes sense. nn;;;

Ass-chan: Yeah... I agree I shouldn't have used "Ellie" instead of a Japanese name, but it was the first thing that came up when I wrote the story and it kinda stuck. I promise no more weird names unless they're Japanese, but I hate going back and changing the plot/characters so "Ellie" is going to stay for the moment being. Maybe it could be short for something like "Etzuki", you know, put "E" and "ki" together and it'll sound something like "Eli". nn;;;

Licht Sieger: I'm really sorry about the spelling errors! I'll try to go over them again when I have the time. nn Thank you again for your support, don't worry about the similar weapon thingy, I'm over that now. I just want to get this chapter out onto the web and out of my hair. nn;;;

The SOC Puppet: I am SOOO SORRY about the Gender-mix thing! Oo;;; Next time remind me to keep my mouth shut. xx;;; Um.. Thanks for the encouragement and I'm also thoroughly in love with your two stories Bloodlines and Eye of the Beholder !

Maguswizard: Thanks for the hint, and yeah, I was thinking about changing most of the Chuunin exam anyway. I really don't like Naruto being an idiot. nn Not sure about the "Overkill" though... nn;;;

Silver Dragonfly: yeah... it took me a while to figure out HOW I was going to make Naruto motivated enough to become the next Hokage - I really wanted him to have that dream to hold on to. And while watching one of the earlier episodes, it just clicked in my mind that I should use Konohamaru to be the boost. And it worked! nn

Someguy6790: I've already got a few beta readers helping but I could also use more help. That's how bad I am. nn;;; Thank you for the offer and I'll consider it. Also thank you for your review.

Gatomon18: Yes.. I'll have to agree that this story kicks ass too! nn Thank you for your encouraging review.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. **PEOPLE WHO HAVEN'T READ NARUTO BOOK 4 AND 5 WILL HAVE PROBLEMS FOLLOWING THIS CHAPTER!!** I'm trying to cut back on retelling the story so I'll be cutting out a lot of conversations and plot sequences that has already occurred in the manga/anime. Please for those who have NOT read the book, don't feel discouraged, give me an email and I might find a way to retype the chapter and send it to you directly with all the holes filled in.

Um... you might find that the relationship between Naruto and Sasuke is NOT a bitter rivalry of any sort. Lets just say they both respect each other and learn from one another. They may not outright say they CARE for one another but they do watch each other's backs and fully trust one another.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Uni started again... I'll be busier than I was before so I WILL be slowing down with my written. I know it's not fair to you all but please; I don't want my head to split trying to do so many things at one go. GOMEN!!

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 6

Monday found Naruto sitting at the local Ninja hospital early in the morning, awaiting his weekly Medical check up since being listed on the "injured" list of available Shinobis. A full month had passed since his return from the Wave country and everyone seemed to be busy except for him.

Proving himself useful, Haku had been put under more and more workload, resulting in the lessening of contact between him and

Naruto. Jiraiya was still around causing havoc with the local female population, while Naruto tried his very best NOT to be associated with the Pervert Sennin at all times, especially during the day. Iruka was busy with the next batch of students at the academy and rarely have time to even go out for dinner, let alone spend time with Naruto. Kakashi, Sasuke and Sakura had visited him once (Sasuke had to be dragged there) but the time spent in their presence was short and ever since, each of them seemed to have their own things to do.

Bored out of his mind, Naruto could only hope that he proved to the doctors soon that he was fit for duty again. Even doing boring missions had to be better than staying home all the time doing nothing. Startled by the nurse calling his name, Naruto moved gracefully into the doctor's room for his check up, hoping against hope that he'd be put in the "active duty" list again. Fortunately for him, lady luck seemed to be with him today.

After a few minutes of analysis, the doctor gave him the all clear for active duty. However, Naruto was thoroughly warned by the doctors not to exert himself too much, because his right wrist and arm was still in the healing process. If the strain put on them exceeded their limits, especially when performing dangerous Jutsus, then the ligaments and muscle tissues may well be completely destroyed the next time around, leaving Naruto paralysed in one arm for the rest of his life.

Ignoring the much-emphasized warning, Naruto skipped happily away from the hospital. Looking back at the rising sun of the morning, Naruto realised that if he hurried, he could still catch up with Sasuke and Sakura for today's mission.

Running towards the bridge area where his group usually met up for missions, his arrival surprised both Sakura and Sasuke who were already there waiting for their errant and late Sensei.

"Naruto! What are you doing here?!" asked Sakura in a happy but still slightly concerned voice. In the background, Sasuke merely

arched an eyebrow at his entrance but the dark haired boy smirked nonetheless.

"I've been released into active duty again. As long as I don't over exert myself, I'll be fine!" smiled Naruto. Ever since his return to Konoha, it has been easier for him to smile at people, which made both him and the people surrounding him feel more welcomed and at ease.

"That's great Naruto!" Sakura smiled sincerely. "Welcome back!"

"Hai! Hai. Welcome back, Naruto-kun." A voice from above startled them all. The genins of team 7 looked up in surprise at Kakashi. It seems, as he's earlier than usual today. He smiled encouragingly at his favourite team for a long time. "Well, let's get going then."

And for the rest of the day, Naruto had a small smile stuck on his face. No matter how insignificant and stupid the boring D rank mission was; it was still satisfying to be doing something. Although Naruto had done the least amount of work in this particular mission, he had spent most of the time analysing how far Sasuke and Sakura had come with their training.

Naruto was silently impressed, both of them had improved from their time in the Wave country, seems Kakashi-sensei had spent some time teaching them new Jutsus.

Taking a break during the mission, Naruto asked them what they had learnt. Sakura explained to him that Kakashi had been mainly focusing on teaching them what he believed were things that suited their physical and mental stamina at the moment.

Sakura, herself had been learning more Genjutsu techniques and improving her physical stamina and Chakra control so that more sophisticated Jutsus could be mastered later in time. Sasuke had been learning more elemental Jutsus, mainly of the Katan and Doton variety (Fire and Earth types).

Naruto nodded in excitement at his team member's improvements. They're really growing fast, especially Sasuke.

When asked what he had been doing the whole month he's been away on the "injured" list, Naruto answered that he had been very bored. Sometimes, he would purposely seek out the infamous Konohamaru Corps to find some entertainment; sometimes he would visit the Library and just spend the day reading up on history or Ninja techniques. Other times, when Haku was with him, they would spend it trading Jutsus.

"Trading Jutsus? You mean, he's been teaching you some of his own techniques?" Sakura exclaimed and though not seeming to, Sasuke was also listening on the conversation.

"Well, not the ones supported only by his bloodline limit. So I can't do the Special Water needles attack or the Demonic Ice mirrors but I have been learning some of the more normal Water jutsus." Naruto answered calmly.

"Like what?" Sasuke asked for the first time, curious as to how much Naruto had grown even though he was suppose to be taking it easy while on the injured list.

Naruto smirked at him. "Not telling." Sasuke glared back.

Actually, Naruto had been slightly busy trying to master the new Water techniques. The list of jutsus that have been taught by Haku includes: Mizu Bunshin no jutsu (Water clone), Water Dragon Blast no jutsu, Water Explosion no jutsu, and Water Barrier no jutsu. Another more unique jutsu was a combination of the Water needles attack that Naruto mixed it with air temperature (of which he is able to manipulate) and created his original "Aisu Shin no jutsu" (Ice needles attack). (1)

In exchange, Naruto had taught Haku some of his own jutsu (either taught to him by someone else or some his own creation) such as: Bakuretsu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu (Explosive Clone), Raiten Misu

Bakuhatsu no jutsu (Lightning Water Blast), RaiKan Mahi no jutsu (Lightning Paralysis), Chiyute no Jutsu (Healing jutsu), and some common Fuiin jutsus (Sealing Jutsus) and Fuiin Kai jutsus (Seal Release Jutsus). All of which helped Haku in his new profession as a Medic Nin.

By the end of the day, all members of Team 7 were tired and ready for a rest, all except Naruto. He had been resting for a full month and would rather spend the rest of the day training. However, with Sasuke refusing ("I'm going home."), Sakura apologetically busy ("My mom needed my help with something, I'm sorry, Naruto.") and Kakashi just disappearing ("I have to submit the mission report"); Naruto was left alone again. Sighing, he decided to seek out his fan club, the Konohamaru Corp.

Finding the gang of brats, they somehow managed to convince Naruto to participate in a game of Tag! Naruto didn't even know what the game was about let alone wanted to participate in it, but somehow, he could never refuse Moegi's puppy dog eyes. So there he was, chasing after the three brats. Though he didn't show it, Naruto was actually very happy playing such a ridiculous game. Considering this was probably the first childhood game he had ever participated in. Since his childhood years, with no friends and family, Naruto had never played any of these children's games mainly because nobody had wanted to play with him. Now, at least, he could indulge in these particular games and imagine as if he was still a child himself.

However, the game came to an abrupt halt when Konohamaru, not looking what was up ahead of him, ran into someone dangerous. The boy looked up from his position on the ground to gaze at the irritable look on a black clothed person. The emblem on the person's head protector declared him one of the Sand Shinobis, same with the female companion standing next to him.

"That hurt kid! You'll pay for that" The dark clad boy, a few years older than Konohamaru growled and picked up the scared boy by his

long scarf and held him in the air. Konohamaru struggled but with his short arms and legs, he couldn't do much to the older boy.

Moegi and Udon immediately shouted at the boy to let Konohamaru go, but when the older boy glared at them too, they quickly retreated behind a calm and composed Naruto. Naruto narrowed his eyes at the scene but decided to be civil for the time being, however, his anger was on a short leash.

"Let him go, he meant you no harm." Naruto softly but firmly ordered the other boy.

The other boy glared at Naruto, then smirked. "And if I don't want to?" Holding tightly to Konohamaru's scarf, he lifted the younger boy higher as if to threaten Naruto.

"Hey. We should go, Kankuro. We don't want to cause any trouble." Warned the older looking girl beside the dark clad boy but he didn't seem to be listening.

Naruto threw a shuriken quickly at the boy named Kankuro, then started performing a seal. Kankuro, seeing the shuriken flying at him at high speed, immediately let go of the hanging child and threw himself into a defensive position. He tried to use his Chakra strings to grab hold of the shuriken but to his shock, there suddenly appeared hundreds of shurikens in the air, instead of just one, and all of them were flying towards him.

"Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" yelled Naruto as all the replicated shurikens all hurl themselves at the defensive Sand Nin.

Kankuro's eyes widened in slight fear at the number of shurikens he now had to deal with. There's no way my Chakra strings can handle this! I'll have to use Karasu!! But even as he thought of the idea, the female Sand Nin beside him reacted quickly.

She pulled her cloth like belt away from her waistline and released a ninja weapon that looked very much like a large fan. Once released,

the female Nin held tightly to her weapon of choice, opened the fan half way and swung it in a full circle arc as she twisted her body in a full circle and finally stopped on bent knees facing her original direction.

The fan weapon created a large gust of wind that threw all the shurikens into disarray as well as the surrounding people and objects too. Udon and Moegi hiding behind Naruto grabbed tightly onto his pants, and were able to withstand the wind and stay in position. This was because Naruto had concentrated enough Chakra on his feet to keep him stuck on the ground. Konohamaru on the other hand, had been blown away by the fierce wind, but was quickly caught by a Naruto clone and also held into position until the wind subsided.

Once the wind had stopped brewing, the two Sand Nins looked up in surprise because the shurikens (after being blown away) returned to advance towards Kankuro. What the two didn't know was that each and every shuriken clone created by Naruto were also Chakra enhanced with better control, so they will continue to advance towards their intended target, which in this case, is the dark clad boy.

Seeing that his sister's fan had little to no effect against the Konoha Nin, Kankuro was about to get ready to unleash his Karasu when a new voice entered the fight. "Kankuro. Stop it. You can't win against him."

Narrowing his eyes to disguise his surprise at a new presence and watching how the dark clad boy flinched at the voice and stepped down from his battle position, Naruto released his Jutsu and all but one of the Shurikens disappeared. He commanded using his Chakra signature for that particular shuriken to disable its original order and return to him, which it promptly did. Then, moving slowly and deliberately, he gazed behind him and looked upon another Sand Nin, this one hanging upside down from a tree with a big gourd strapped to his back. His Chakra! It's.... abnormal! Naruto concluded as he watched the exchange between the smallest, yet obviously the

leader of the Sand team scold, or more appropriately, threaten his own team mates for their lack of discipline.

Accepting the nonchalant apology from the red haired Sand Nin, Naruto was surprised at how easily the other boy manipulated the sand to transport himself down onto the ground. Curious, he asked them before they left the scene: "Why are you Sand Nins here in Konoha?"

"We're here for the Chuunin Exam. Don't you even know?" Answered the female ninja arrogantly, but Naruto had already received his answer and let the sarcastic comment slide. He nodded in acknowledgment and turned around to start moving away, calling Konohamaru, Moegi and Udon to his side as they left, but was suddenly interrupted by the red haired boy's inquiry.

"Wait. I am Gaara of the Sand. You? What's your name?" The boy asked in a monotone voice.

Naruto continued on his way without pause and simply replied back without turning around to face the dangerous Sand Nin. "Not interested. We'll be meeting each other again at the Chuunin Exam anyway."

And with that said, both groups left on their merry way.

The next day, it was confirmed by Kakashi that the members of team 7 was nominated for the Chuunin Selection exam.

The day after Kakashi's announcement was the day of the Chuunin selection exam. All three members of team 7 had gathered together early that morning outside the official Ninja Academy and started to head towards room 303 for their registration.

Upon arrival, team 7 was met with a large group of people gathered around a door with the label on it stating it was room 301. Watching the commotion between two Genjutsu highlighted Chuunins and two

Konoha Genins (both hiding their true potential), Naruto opted to stay out of the battle and watch from the sidelines. The girl's a weapons specialist if the amount of scrolls on her with summoned weapons is any indication.(2) Naruto smirked to himself as he watched the girl's reaction to the two hidden Chuunins. Heh. Looks like I'm not the only one that actually *summons* weapons instead of just carrying a lot. Looking at the other Genin, a boy in green with very thick eyebrows. A Taijutsu specialist, probably faster than me. Naruto thought, intrigued.

Naruto was happy to stay outside of the commotion; unfortunately for him, Sasuke didn't feel the same. "Get out of my way. I'm going to the third floor." He said in an arrogant voice.

Some of the surrounding Genins looked back at team 7 in confusion. Whispered conversations of 'What's that guy talking about?' and 'uh?' can be heard easily. Naruto shook his head in exasperation. It's a good thing I got stuck with Sasuke and Sakura. If it had been some of these other Genins... God help me. I think I would have killed them before the damn enemy!

Taking her cue, Sakura stepped in to explain. "This is the second floor, people. Or have you *all* not noticed?!" With that said, all members of team 7 started to move through the crowd towards the other end of the corridor.

However to all their surprise, one of the disguised Chuunins suddenly advanced on Sasuke. Sasuke in turn, reacted to defend himself; but both were quickly stopped by the green clad youth from before.

Wondering why the boy would interfere in the fight, Naruto's own eyebrow slowly but surely arched upwards at the following answer of display. He... he has a crush... on Sakura!!! Naruto thought in pure surprise and a little bit of trepidation. Damn... this gonna be complicated...

Sakura, of course, refused the invitation to go out with the boy. HELLO! WE'RE AT THE BLOODY *CHUUNIN* EXAM!!! We should be concentrating on passing the stupid exam, not on superficial infatuations!!Naruto thought in slight disgust and frustration, very glad that he himself had not fallen for such an ironic circumstance.

On one end was Lee (the boy introduced himself) and Sakura's current problem; on the other, Sasuke had just practically insulted a Hyuuga. A HYUUGA!! FOR CRYING OUT LOUD!! Sasuke! Are you trying to make a strong enemy?!!Naruto thought in slight panic. Hyuuga's are NOT to be underestimated. No matter WHAT the circumstance! Luckily for poor Naruto's sanity, both his team mates were able to break up from their awkward situations and all set off to the correct room of 301.

Upon reaching the lower floors, Naruto was surprised once again when he felt the Chakra signature of that Taijutsu Specialist Genin again, this time following his group. Slowing down and eventually stopping at the other Genin's call, team 7 looked up at him in surprise and confusion when he challenged Sasuke into a fight.

Naruto's eyebrow twitched in annoyance. What was *WRONG* with his team today?Sakura practically fainted because of a few flying kisses that the boy was giving her. Well, I have to admit. I wouldn't like it either if the guy was giving *me* those looks...Naruto thought in disgust. But still... this is going a bit extreme, don't you think?!

Looking at Sasuke about to accept the challenge, Naruto decided to intervene, if only to keep his sanity and temper in tact. "Sasuke! Stop. This guy is too strong for you. He's a Taijutsu specialist, faster and physically stronger than both you AND me."

Sasuke looked back at Naruto with narrowed eyes, as if telling him NOT to interfere. Naruto huffed in frustration. "FINE! DON'T SAY I DIDN'T TELL YOU SO!"

Turning abruptly, Naruto started to stomp away in irritation, ignoring what Sasuke had gotten himself into. As he turned, Naruto continued to grumble to himself. "Stupid Sasuke! We only have 30 minutes before the exam even begins! Wasting valuable time fighting an opponent you're gonna have to fight later anyway. A waste of energy too..." However, out of the corner of his eye, Naruto did watch how Sasuke fared against the Taijutsu master.

The speed difference between the two was obvious. Sasuke may be faster than he was before, but nowhere near as fast as that Lee boy. Even though Sasuke has the Sharingan on, he can't catch up to Lee if his own body was not built for that kind of speed. Naruto thought in disappointment. Damn! He's just setting himself up for failure... and then I'm gonna have to deal with a depressed *and* arrogant bastard. Shit! This day just can't get any worse.

Frowning while he watched Lee perform a new and dangerous stunt, Naruto realised that the move must have been some sort of forbidden Jutsu. The way he moves... it must damage his muscles a lot to be making moves like that. As Naruto watched worriedly at his friend... no, comrade? or team-mates? He suddenly sensed another presence coming into the room.

A summoned turtle interrupted the battle and Naruto continued to stare at the interaction between turtle and Lee with a very baffled expression on his face. There's *no* way today can get any weirder than this, right? As if fate wanted to torture him, atop the turtle suddenly appeared its summoner, another green clad person with very thick eyebrows. That's it! I've officially reached my weird shit tolerance limit for the day!(3) Naruto thought angrily.

As if to smite him, fate turned even more ironic. The interaction between the boy and his sensei (obviously) was even stranger than his interaction with the turtle, if that was even possible. Naruto's eyebrow hadn't stopped twitching for a while now and he didn't think it would be a good idea to have it twitch constantly through out the entire exam.

As the man disappeared and reappeared directly behind team 7, all members of Kakashi's team was surprised at the jounin's apparent speed, even greater than that of Lee. Blinking in shock, Naruto realised belatedly that Lee's Sensei must also be another Taijutsu expert, with the same amount of speed. Weary of the strange man's relaxed pose and ignoring the man's arrogant statement of him being stronger than Kakashi, Naruto just felt tired all of a sudden and wanted to go home and sleep his frustrations away.

However, looking back at Lee's scarred hand just exposed by his sensei, Naruto also realised just how much the boy must have trained to get his body so fit in the first place. Looking back at Sasuke's angry and frustrated face, Naruto wanted his team mate to understand that there *are* people out there stronger than them, and that these people are not to be envied. Perhaps this will help Sasuke with his superiority complex. Thought Naruto hopefully.

Once the two green clad people were gone, Naruto concentrated his efforts on Sasuke. Knowing him, he'll need a bit of encouragement, even though it had to come out in a very round about way "Looks like the Sharingan ability is useless against someone like him. And the Uchiha blood isn't that powerful either." Naruto said snidely.

"Naruto!" Sakura looked at him in alarm and shifted her gaze back at a visibly shaking Sasuke. "Naruto, Please! Just shut up about it!"

"Heh.. I bet you'd just get your ass kicked again if you challenged him." Naruto continued his barrage of insults, ignoring Sakura's pleading eyes and alarmed voice. Come on Sasuke, don't disappoint me again. Channel the anger into power, but not the hate! I know you can do this. Change the anger into determination, not desperation. Naruto watched Sasuke's reaction carefully. "You saw it too. He must of trained harder than you. That's all it is."

Finally, Sasuke stopped shaking completely and smirked back at his two-team mates. "Yeah... well... It certainly will be interesting to fight him again. Let's see what this Chuunin Exam have in store for us

all." The smirk softened into a small smile directly slightly at Naruto, a silent 'thanks' sent as a message through the eyes.

Naruto nodded slightly in response, acknowledging the silent thanks. "Let's go guys." And all three members of team 7 walked towards their destination, room 301, without incident this time.

Upon reaching the correct room, Naruto slid the doors open but all three were shocked at the number of people participating in this year's Chuunin exam. There has to be more than a hundred Genins here in this room! was the thought that went through all three member's of team 7.

Staring wide eyed at all their competitors; Naruto started feeling slightly excited about the prospect of fighting all these people. I wonder what challenges they'll give us...however, his thoughts were rudely interrupted by a female screech beside him that made him jump slightly at the unfamiliar voice.

"SASUKE KUN!!! You're late!!!" screamed a blonde haired girl at the top of her voice, currently strangling Sasuke. Naruto blinked in surprise. "I haven't seen you in a while", the girl said, trying to sound seductive but only managed to make Sasuke angry (if the twitching eyebrow is any indicator). "So I've been waiting in ANTICIPATION to see you again! I KNEW you would come!!!"

"GET AWAY FROM SASUKE KUN! INO PIG!!!" screamed Sakura in retaliation. Naruto just watched from the sidelines as both girls go at it like a catfight, until he was interrupted once again by another unfamiliar voice.

"Oi. Oi. You guys are taking this stupid exam too, huh? Damn... it's so troublesome." Said another boy with black hair tied up in a short ponytail. Beside him, stood a rather chubby boy with brown hair, who was currently stuffing as much food (chips looks like) into his mouth as possible.

Naruto was just about to inquire who they were when he was interrupted once again by yet another unfamiliar voice directed at his teammates.

"Well, well... Seems like everyone's finally here. All 9 of this year's rookies are here to participate in the exam. Wonder which one of us is gonna even pass the first test." The comment came from a boy with messy dark brown hair, with a dog on the top of his hood. Beside him stood another boy with dark glasses on and another one of the Hyuuga clan's descendant, this time, a very pale looking girl with dark blue hair.

"Pfft. Getting scared already, Kiba?" Answered a smirking Sasuke as he finally got the blonde girl off his back.

Naruto watched the tense rivalry between Sasuke and the boy with the dog for a few seconds before finally deciding to inquire of his teammates who these people were. Pulling both Sasuke and Sakura aside for the moment, he asked them in a quiet whisper: "Who are these people?"

Sakura blinked at him in surprise. "You don't know them?"

Naruto shook his head while Sasuke smirked again. "Of course he doesn't. He was only here for one day at the academy before he passed into Genin."

"Oh." Sakura shook her surprise away and started introducing each and every one of the new Genin rookies of this year, as well as giving Naruto some whispered hints on their personalities.

"Well, this here is INO PIG!" Pointing at the still flirtatious blonde haired girl in discontent, Sakura continued. "A member of Asuma's team 10, Yamanaka Ino is nothing but a stupid and annoying girl that..."

"OH SHUT YA MOUTH! BIG FOREHEAD GIRL! Sasuke-kun is MINE!!!" the newly introduced Ino retaliated by sticking her tongue

out. Naruto was able to conclude from their confrontation that these two girls were somewhat rivals, especially in the department of getting Sasuke's attention.

Pushing her anger aside, Sakura continued to introduce team 10's other members. "The one who is continuously complaining is Nara Shikamaru. I don't know him very well, only that he isn't one of the brightest students from the Academy and he's also damn lazy too." Sakura whispered to Naruto as if it were a secret. "The fat one next to him is Akimichi Chouji. Um... all I know about him is that he eats a lot. He usually hags out with Shikamaru, but that's all I know."

Naruto nodded in acknowledgement and looked over to the other group waiting Sakura's explanations. "The one with the dog is Inuzuka Kiba with his dog, Akamaru. They're both from Kurnai's team 8. He's an annoying idiot who thinks he's better than Sasuke-kun (as if) and acts like he's always the boss or something."

Turning her attention to the other two members of team 8, Sakura paused for a moment to gather her thoughts then started her explanation again. "The boy with glasses is Aburame Shino, I don't know anything about him except that he is a very quiet person. The girl is Hyuuga Hinata. She's a rather shy girl and doesn't really interact with anyone else. Oh... she also doesn't have much self-esteem. Poor girl."

Surprised, Naruto's gaze once again fell onto the Hyuuga girl. Strange! Usually, heirs to these advanced clans are obnoxious in their pride, not this weak willed. Suddenly noticing Naruto's gaze on her, the girl, Hinata, started to move behind the more outgoing Kiba, trying to hide. Naruto frowned, surprised again by her obvious fear. If she's so afraid then WHY is she here to take the Chuunin Exam?

Feeling the presence of someone walking towards them, Naruto swung around to look at the advancing young man with grey hair and spectacles. "Hey! You guys! You should be more quiet!"

Naruto immediately narrowed his eyes at him. He's suspicious. Ignoring the young man's words, Naruto analysed his body posture as well as what he could sense about the man's Chakra abilities through the bond with the Nine tails (4). This man is strong. TOO STRONG to be just a genin. Narrowing his eyes further when the man explained that this was his 7th try at becoming a Chuunin. His Chakra is as advance as Kakashi's, there's no way that this guy is still at Genin level... unless... he's a spy... I'll have to keep an eye on him.

Curious about Kabuto (the man introduced himself as such) and his "Nin Info Cards", Naruto decided to check out exactly how much information the man had when it concerned special Genins not of the Hidden Leaf, as that was what Sasuke asked about that Lee boy from before. "Hey. Do you have any information on a guy called Gaara, of the Sand?"

The man agreed and performed the same moves he had done with the card of Rock Lee. Naruto could feel his two team mates look at him in slight curiosity, wondering who this Gaara person was. Finally complete, all of the Rookie genin groups gathered around to look at this Sand genins information. What they say surprised all of them.

"Wow! Mission History: 8 C rank missions and 1 B rank mission. This kid is good, for a Genin to take on a B rank mission. I don't have any other information on him except that he returns from every single mission without a scratch on him. This is amazing." Kabuto commented with amazement in his tone of voice (it wasn't faked either, as far as Naruto could tell).

"Where did you come across a guy like him, Naruto?" Asked Sasuke, now feeling more excited about the prospect of fighting a strong person like this Sand kid.

"Oh... I just ran into him the other day." Naruto commented as nonchalantly as possible.

Sakura looked at Naruto curiously but decided not to push for questioning, if Naruto didn't want to answer, nothing less than God himself could make him talk. Looking back at Kabuto, she asked: "Does that mean that everyone who is participating in this current Chuunin Exam is like those two Genins?"

"Yep." Answered Kabuto honestly. "Everyone here are the elite Genins of their country, so they're all probably very strong."

"M...Makes you lose your confidence... I... I don't think I want... want to do this anymore..." Hinata spoke for the first time, visibly shivering in fear.

Sakura took pity on the pale girl but understood exactly what she meant. We're the rookies among all the Genins... do... do we even stand a chance?She thought depressingly.

Naruto looked back at the two insecure girls and frowned. "If you're sensei's didn't believe in your abilities, then they would never have nominated you to partake in the Exam in the first place. The whole point that you are here and not at home means that you've got something in you all that your sensei's are proud of. If you don't believe in your ability, at least believe in your Sensei's judgement. They probably know you better than you know yourself."

Done with encouraging the rookie Genins, Naruto turned around to face Kabuto again. He did not notice that his words gave both the girls more confidence in themselves then they normally felt. Sakura smiled behind Naruto. Thank you. Naruto-kun. I know that even though you didn't say it out loud, but *you* of all people believe in me... I won't disappoint you or Sasuke-kun.

As for the other girl, Hinata looked towards Naruto with a new light in her eyes. Naruto...Kun... Arigato. I... I should have more belief... in Kurenai Sensei's judgement... and I should have more confidence in myself.

Unbeknownst of the current developments behind him, Naruto was currently narrowing his eyes in slight suspicion as he asked Kabuto another question. "Do you have any information on *me* ?"

Kabuto looked up at Naruto in surprise, while the other Genins all tensed slightly and gathered around even closer to look at the information present. Even Sakura and Sasuke wondered at the extent of Naruto's ability while Naruto was only curious as to what Kabuto had on him.

Calling up the card, Kabuto looked into Naruto's information. To his surprise, there wasn't much there either. "Mission History: 10 D rank missions, 1 C rank mission. Team mates: Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura and Sensei Hayate Kakashi. I don't have any information on your abilities at all since you've only been here for less than 6 months and this is your first time participating in the Chuunin Exam... Let's see, special note... what the hell..."

Naruto narrowed his eyes at that little special note placed by the side of the card. DAMN IT! WHY THE HELL IS THAT THERE!!??

Kabuto told the rest of the group what was written in the card uneasily, since he had forgotten about that little note he had written to himself on this specific candidate. "It says here you've been the unofficial student of one of the legendary three Sennins - Jiraiya-sama, for the past 6 years."

All the eyes of the other Genins widened in shock and looked at Naruto in awe, while he, himself was thoroughly annoyed at how that information was leaked out in the first place. No one is suppose to know about that at all! His eyebrow twitched continuously. When I find out who leaked that information, I'm gonna kill them...

Just then, a big burst of smoke appeared from the front of the classroom. Once the smoke cleared, it revealed behind it a group of Advance Chuunins (5) all ready and waiting to start the first stage of the Chuunin Exam. The Examiner for the First Stage was Morino

Ibiki, a very harsh man who immediately commanded complete attention from all the Genins.

Following the instructions given by the Examiner, all the rookie genins of the leaf were separated when they were seated according to the number they drew out of the box (6). Naruto found sat at his seat #53, next to the Hyuuga girl and an unknown leaf Genin who is a lot older than both him and Hinata.

Settling down, he gave the girl... HINATA... I've got to get use to these people! It's not that they're virtual strangers or anything! Hell, we've already been INTRODUCED! Naruto gave Hinata an encouraging smile and she blushed in return then turned away from his scrutiny. Naruto could only blinked in confusion. What did I do??? I hope I didn't scare her or anything.(7) Sitting down, Naruto turned his attentions away from Hinata and looked towards the front of the room where the Examiner was currently writing out all the rules to the written exam.

"Um... Naruto...kun?" A soft voice from his right side spoke to him. Moving his attention away from Morino back to Hinata, Naruto was surprised to see her face still slightly red. "Um... good luck... Let's do our best, ne?"

Naruto gave her a confident smile and replied back in a whisper. "Nothing to worry about. This will be easy." She nodded in return and both of their attentions were once again directed at the front where the Examiner had just finished listing out all the rules.

Let's see... A subtraction point system... seems easy enough. Team event, duh... why do they think we could only enrol in teams... Now this is interesting... Be a proud Ninja, huh? If I didn't know better, I'd think Morino is actually egging us on to try and cheat. He must have a reason for that. And that final rule is obvious. There can't be any losers in a team effort or else the entire team suffers. Logical enough.

Naruto, sure that he had deciphered all there is to decipher from the test rules, began flipping over his test and looked at each question in detail. Hm... this *is* certainly interesting. Naruto smirked as he could feel many people in the room tensing after they've read all the questions. No Genin would be able to answer all these questions... so there must be a plant here somewhere.

Deciding to take his time, Naruto looked through all the questions again, confused at question number 10, but leaving it for now. He completed all the ones he could, using all his background knowledge gathered from more than 6 years of travel with Jiraiya, but even that only gave him about four or five answers to the 9 questions left.

After completing all the ones he, himself, knew the answers to, Naruto started looking around the classroom to see what everyone else is doing to cheat their way through the test and not get failed by a loss of points. He was very surprised at the amount of jutsus and skills being deployed in the room. There were a huge variety of techniques currently in use and the range of skill levels could tell you immediately who were at the Chuunin level and who weren't.

Gaara... he's doing something really weird with his Chakra and sand that I just can't quite understand, oh well. Heh. That Kiba kid is using his dog... Just how in the hell can a dog distinguish the answers from a page of writing, I will never know. That Shino guy is using... hm... bugs? Naruto thought curiously.

Damn, those Byakugans of the Hyuuga's gave them so much leverage it's almost unfair! Naruto grumbled to himself but then started thinking about what his own team members would be doing. Sasuke has probably figured it all out by now, he'll be using his Sharingan to copy all the moves of one of the hidden Chuunins in the room. And Sakura is smart enough to not need to cheat... so that only leaves me... What to do? What to do? Decisions. Decisions.

Tapping a finger on his chin as a sign of thinking, Naruto brightened suddenly when an idea struck. I wonder how many people in this entire room will even recognise the Jutsu I'll do. I don't think many

people have seen it before. Well, it's worth a shot. Closing his eyes in concentration, Naruto dropped both of his hands underneath the table and quickly formed a complicated seal. Releasing his breath, Naruto silently activated the Jutsu. At the same time, a lot of his Chakra escaped his body and start moulding the air around him to create a replication, in the Astral plane, of himself.

Heh... let's see if anyone even noticed.

Hinata tensed when she felt a large amount of Chakra leave Naruto's body. She discretely used her Byakugan to see what he was up to, but what she saw only confused her even more. What is that Chakra doing? She thought as she watched the enormous amount of Chakra just stood still in the air. It wasn't moving at all or doing anything physical. Soon however, the Chakra ball (or that's what Hinata came to call it) started floating away from Naruto. It began travelling from row to row, moving through people, chairs and tables alike as if it couldn't be felt or seen, stopping now and then beside someone writing and then moving on. Just what is that thing? Hinata thought exasperated.

At the front of the room, Morino Ibiki narrowed his eyes. One of the Chuunins sitting by the side also caught his eye and sent him a silent message in question. 'What did that kid do? I saw the hand seals but nothing happened!' Morino looked back at the calm and complacent Naruto, looking to the world as if he was waiting for his present on his birthday. That... was a Ki Bunshin.(8) I haven't seen one of those in almost 20 years! Indeed, the Ki Bunshin is not a technique native to Konoha, in fact, it's a very rare technique only taught to ninjas belonging to only one strand of Hidden Village, the Hidden Air Village (9). This is not a technique Jiraiya-sama would of known. Just how did Naruto get to learn this technique?

Looking around the room, Morino noticed that a lot of the Elite Chuunins in the room had also noticed Naruto doing the seals, but not deciphering the effects of the Jutsu. Morino smirked. Heh... to be able to play us Chuunins and Jounins so well, the kid has got guts, I'll tell ya that! Looking around the classroom, Morino also detected a

few people noticing the Jutsu but not the effects. Sasuke Uchiha and his Sharingan won't be able to copy this Jutsu, no matter how much he wants to. The Hyuuga's are confused as hell to watch such a ball of Chakra flouting around the room. And... that Sand kid, he also noticed the Ki Bunshin but probably doesn't know what it does.

Naruto, on the other hand, was thoroughly enjoying himself watching all the confused gazes being flipped around by the Chuunins. Yes, he was very satisfied, almost patting his back for a job well done. This is fun. But let's get back to business, shall we. Silently, he commanded his Ki Bunshin to return to him. Slowly, Naruto lifted his pencil and got ready to write in the answers of the questions he were unable to answer before hand. Listening to the invisible Ki bunshin standing beside him narrate all the answers, Naruto quickly jotted them down on his page. Once all 9 questions were answered, he silently released his Ki bunshin and felt his Chakra return to its rightful place, within his own body.

Finally, with all the available questions answered, Naruto waited patiently for the final question to be given out. Soon, the time had come for Morino to present this mysterious final question but Naruto immediately narrowed his eyes as Morino added a rule to the question. There's no way he can do what he says! He can't make a person lose their right to ever become a Chuunin! It's preposterous! Standing his ground, Naruto watched in shock and disappointment at all the weak minded people who slowly but surely left the exam. **WHAT IS WRONG WITH THESE PEOPLE!? HAVE THEY NO FAITH IN THEMSELVES AT ALL!!**

Naruto watched in silence as people began to flitter away, leaving only a few Genin teams left in the room, possessing the confidence to risk the final question. No matter what, I am NOT going to back down! No way in HELL! I'm going to pass this stupid CHUUNIN EXAM and then I'm GONNA AIM FOR HOKAGE! I'm not going to be stopped here! Naruto thought angrily.

Finally, when all those who wanted to leave had already left, Morino paused for a moment of suspense before suddenly declaring to

everyone that they passed the first stage of the Chuunin Exam. Naruto blinked in shock as many of the others in the room retaliated and demanded an answer to their questions.

It seems, there never was a question 10 to begin with. Naruto grinned to himself. I knew there was no way he could create that ruling! But his relief was vanished when he felt a new presence flying towards the classroom at top speed. Ducking slightly to avoid the pieces of glass flown about due to the impact of that unidentified flying object (UFO) smashing its way through the window, Naruto was stunned by the entrance of none other than the second examiner, Mitarashi Anko-sama.

Blinking back his shock, Naruto and the rest of the examinees slowly trudged behind a very energetic Mitarashi Anko towards the location of the second Chuunin exam. Though still conservative, even Naruto had to admit his excitement at finding out their next exam would be held in the Forest of Death. It was the forest itself that he was looking forward to. On the contrary, been forced to stay put for a month and a half, Naruto was all for it when it came to more combat and ninja battles. He was starting to get rusty anyway.

End

(1) The Water needles attack is strictly Haku's, but Naruto understands the concept of how it is done and he mixes it with his other techniques to create the "Ice needles" attack. The Ice needles is very similar to Haku's but it takes longer to do because you have to collect the water molecules first then freeze them before you can use them. The good thing about this attack is that it is invisible. Naruto is STILL unable to do the water needle attack and he will never be able to learn that technique but with the Ice needle attack, he has come pretty close to copying Haku's technique.

(2) Sorry, this might sound very much like Shattered Illusion , but I can't help it. I apologies in advance to the author of Shattered Illusion for stealing her idea, please don't sue me!

(3) "Weird Shit Tolerance Limit"! Copied from one of the chapters in Demon of Justice , a Gundam Wing story by Mel and Christy, one of my favourite stories. I'm really sorry for copying your idea and even the exact words but I absolutely loved how ironic the phrase sounds and it just fits so perfectly into this story. I apologies again, so please let me get away with this one, please!?

(4) Will be explained later. As you guys probably guessed, Naruto and Kyubi have already **met** under other circumstance and have come to some kind of compromise. I won't spoil it here but I will give you a hint. Kyuubi and Naruto has made some kind of deal in which Kyuubi no longer need to interfere with Naruto's life, however, this agreement has also left Naruto free rein over the use of Kyuubi's original Chakra.

(5) When I say "Advance Chuunins", all I mean is that the Chuunin is quite powerful, close enough to become a Jounin, but lack enough experience or expertise, stuff like that. I've always thought that for a Chuunin, Iruka and Mizuki were rather weak, so I've kept those two Chuunins as normal Chuunins, while Chuunins (namely the ones in the exam) are called Elite Chuunins or Advance Chuunins.

(6) Um... you don't actually SEE the box but lets just say that's how they pick their tabs, okay? nn;;;

(7) Hurray for all the NarutoXHinata fans!!! Yes, HERE is where Hinata finds herself STARTING to form a CRUSH on Naruto, but this NARUTO is probably JUST AS CLUELESS as the original, especially when it comes to his own love life. He's not stupid! By NO means is my version of Naruto stupid.. he just doesn't expect anyone to like him... in that way, that's all. I mean, with a childhood as his, he'd be more suspicious than ever, but currently, he's just a bit dense, that's all. nn

(8) "Ki Bunshin" or "Chi Bunshin", based on but different to the "Chi Bunshin" in the story Return of the Unforgettable , wonderful story, that one. A must read if you ask me. I apologies to the Author of Return of the Unforgettable if I've used your term without your

permission, but this is very different from the one you used in your story, only using the same name. Gomen ne! Oh.. The effects of this version of Ki bunshin will be explained later. nn Please be patient!

(9) Again, a name based on the story Return of the Unforgettable ! Please don't be angry at me, I swear this version of the Hidden Air Village is very different from the one used in Return of the Unforgettable ! The "Air" in this sense actually means "ku" in Japanese or "Kong" in Chinese (which means "Empty" or "Space" all at the same time nn;;). The village itself will be explained later when my OC comes.

This was a damn loooooonnnnnngggg chapter. Well. Give me a short break before I start the next one okay. nx

Um... more questions:

During the Preliminary Third Chuunin Exam, Sakura Vs Ino, do you guys want Sakura to win? Or lose? Or draw? (keep in mind that she's different from the anime/manga)

Chapter 8

I am SOOOO SORRY for the massive wait for this chapter to come out. I had a lot of difficulty writing this chapter and my beta readers also had to look through it again and again to pick out all my errors. Please don't be angry with me...TT Hopefully, the next one won't take this long as well...

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Seven: Orochimaru Part 1!!!

Replies to my wonderful reviewers: **Spoilers for some of the replies...**

AngelfromHell: I can only update as fast as I type and I'm already juggling this with my website and my University work, so no matter how you see it, I'm still going to be going slower than the 1 chapter 1 week updates from before. nn Thank you for the Jutsu ideas, I should have emailed you about them before but just in case you didn't receive my email, some of them I will be incorporating in the story later on. Thank you very much for your help. nn

Emotwo: Um.. I was planning on having Naruto lose against Orochimaru and have the 5-part seal put on him... But this story refuses to let me does that... So uh... even I don't know what's gonna happen in the plot. nn;;;

Fionn the Otaku: I don't consider Naruto a Mary Sue (technically, I don't even know what a Mary Sue is nn ;;) but I don't think Mary

Sue's are emotionally scared like my Naruto is. He may seem like the perfect know-it-all, but he's NOT. The techniques learnt came from 6 years of bloody training, 4 with Jiraiya, and 2 with my two OCs, and trust me, when I say train, I meant INTENSIVE training. Even fiercer than what he went through to learn the Rasengan in the manga. And anyway, I never said anything about him "mastering" the Tenkun no buki. Yes, he can use them, but he can't use them to their fullest potential. Just stop complaining for now and keep reading. The good part will come in a few chapters, if I ever get there... ;

Loonluu: I am sooooo sorry! I've read your email before but forgot to reply to it. I'm so stupid sometimes!! TT Thank you so much for your continual support, I really did like those ideas for techniques and will be incorporating some of them in the near future. Please be patient!!

Dearest: I'm glad that I actually got someone psyched about my story and yes; I really wanted Naruto to cheat! Thank you so much for the compliment! The line-ups for the Preliminary and Actual Chuunin Exam will stay the same. I'm still debating over the Sakura issue so it's not confirmed yet if she will win or draw. nn Arigato!

Rash: Naruto may have travelled around the world twice (including the Sand) but Gaara is usually either out on missions or kept well hidden. After all, Gaara has been surviving assassination attempt after assassination attempt since he's six years old (same time as Naruto left Leaf) so the two of them never officially met. And in the Sand, (like the Leaf) the people don't like talking about their resident demon unless said demon is right there in front of them. Okay, now for the other comments: **SPOILER** Orochimaru is one of the Sannin (3 Nins), so even though Naruto is *stronger* than he use to be, he's still not able to defeat Orochimaru. Naruto won't have the opportunity to help seal Sasuke. Just keep on reading and you'll see. nn

Mangalover123: Really? Personally, I'm MORE than happy about the reviews I've been getting so far. I've never had so many reviews for any particular story. Hell, I've never had a story of mine beat the 30-review mark. nn But yeah, I love my Naruto too. nn; I'm actually

thinking about making Ino grow up a bit more as well. I'm kinda like you. I don't like girls whose only thought is about boys. I find that they're stupid. .

Anbu, Zornoid13, Sirius183, Kuroi Hikari, a random reviewer, banevixen, type, PyrOOtje, littlepet, RuByMoOn17, Ayeka Penor, Wormkaizer, Kuroi Kitsune, SilverKnight7, En Satsu Koku Ryuu Ha, S-Wanderer999, Asa-chan, Licht Sieger, Katya D Keaton, insanechildfanfic: ARIGATO MINNA!!! Thank you all for your supportive reviews! I'm doing my best to update as quickly as possible for your enjoyment. I'm pleased to have you all on board for the ride! nn

Dfourthhorseman: Yeah. I've thought about being able to summon the Kyuubi from within, but in that case, that means that Naruto will have to open the seal completely to let Kyuubi take his full form. In this particular story, **SPOILER** I'm going to let Naruto twist that idea a bit and let him summon *part* of Kyubi. nn You'll understand when I explain it later in the up-coming chapters. But don't think I won't be doing the original idea. I have been doing my best to shift Naruto's personality from his habit of being conservative and cynical. It's not that he's always in a bad mood; it's just that (before) he'd had no friends to make him feel welcomed, and now he does. He's grown to feel comfortable in his own skin as well as the presence of others, he's starting to crave that attention so he'll slowly become his cheery self (like in the original) but not as extreme.

Hitomi No Ryu: Ne. Ne. Is it okay if I use the idea but not as one of the Tenkun no buki. Other people have suggested to me that I should continue on with these original weapons but create another set other than the Tenkun no buki. Since 9 out of the 10 Tenkun no buki have been created already, I kinda want to reserve the 10th position just in case I needed to change the weapons around a bit. So is it okay if I use this sword/whip idea of yours much later in the story. **SPOILER** You see, I'm planning on having a 2nd Chuunin Exam during the Second Arc of this "Faith" Series, and so I'll be needing a lot of original characters and their perspective techniques and

weapons choices. nn You can given come up with a whole team dedicated to you. Hows that for fun?! nn

Anime Lass: I'm not going to tell you how strong Naruto really is, because there's nothing to compare him with. nn;; You'll just have to wait and see. Not sure about how far Naruto would go against Kabuto because we have never seen Kabuto use his full strength either. Naruto came across the Air technique from my OC (which will finally be introduced after the prelims). **SPOILER** There are several people other than Orochimaru that can be considered stronger than Naruto, but as I've said, Naruto's strength is a "relative" term, it can change – drastically, depending on what he wishes to do. About his hand/arm that was hurt by the Ginshi no Himo, it has healed, so as long as he doesn't put too much stress on it (stretch it, pull a muscle, etc.), it won't hurt him. He can use it whenever he wants, it just hurts sometime if he pushes himself to far, and this means that he's *not* handicapped. So far, Naruto has 4 out of the 10 Tenkun no bukis. He's able to stop searching for the Tenkun no buki for now because my OC is helping him find them first. It'll be explained later what his relation to this VERY IMPORTANT OC is. nn No comment on the bond between Kyuubi and Naruto. That'll be a secret that won't be revealed until MUCH LATER!! Don't worry about all these questions, it basically shows me that you're thinking about all the little interesting holes I've left in my plot. Yup, they will all be answered through out the story but it'll be a long wait. I don't like giving answers up so quickly and spoil the entire suspense of the story. nn Hope you don't mind waiting. Trust me, the wait is WORTH IT!

Oofah: I've never actually heard of the "Witchblade" weapon before, you'll have to introduce me to it (give me a web address to look through or something). As for your other comment, yeah, I know I've got so many different subplots that keeps on popping up during the main plot. Personally, the story kinda just wrote itself. I didn't *plan* on having so many different things, it just kinda *happened* ! If you know what I mean. Well, thank you for your review and your support!

Liemtenshi: **SPOILER** Naruto will notice Orochimaru but not in the beginning (because the whole tongue thing has been cut out – I don't think this Naruto would do anything that immature anyway). However, even if Naruto did notice Orochimaru, there's no way for him to escape, as long as he's with Sasuke, Orochimaru will go after them. Um.. Naruto won't be confronting Kabuto just yet. Not sure how that will turn out, but as I've said before, the story wrote itself, so I'll see where it takes me. nn

Insanity: I've actually got several people telling me I should continue with the different weapons approach, I think I just might. nn However, these ones most definitely won't be as powerful as the Tenkun no buki. I won't be having any "Weapons of the Demonic Warriors", because I don't think demons actually use weapons, they just use their original powers. Well, anyway. **BIG SPOILER** I'm planing on having a 2nd Chuunin Exam so I'll be needing a lot more original characters and their respective weapons choice and techniques. Think you can help me with that? nn However, be warned that this won't be coming out for a long time yet. Sorry about the wrong spelling for "Katon", yeah, I'll change it when I have some time. I agree that the plot is certainly changing Naruto in a very fast pace, but considering Naruto was forced into the leadership role during the Wave country expedition, he's kinda got use to it a bit. In this story, Naruto takes his responsibilities and promises very seriously. He had promised himself (during the Wave Country part) that he would help his teammates become stronger and the help keep them safe. Once he views them as *precious* or *important* to him, he's attitude change into becoming very... I guess, "protective" is one way of saying it. As for the fire idea... it's a very interesting concept... I like it.. but I don't think I'll be using it as part of the Tenkun no buki. I might be able to find a way to incorporate it later during the 2nd Chuunin exam. Is that okay? Hope you're alright with that. Anyway, enjoy this chapter and thank you for your continual support! nn

Grand Admiral Gin: No, I don't think I'll have Naruto learn Initial or Extreme Lotus Taijutsu style. **SPOILER** He'll be learning a special

Taijutsu style from my OC much later in the series, similar to the Jyuuken of the Hyuga. nn Just watch and wait.

TokehGecko: Heh. You're right about the first thing. I'm not even gonna consider Naruto being tied up. nn **SPOILER** For the unsealing part though, I'm not even sure if he's gonna get the 5-part seal bestowed on him. But even if he did, he won't be able to get it off himself, because he won't have enough Chakra to do so (considering he'd probably be hurt and the Kyuubi's Chakra is further sealed from him). Well, just read and enjoy the chapter. nn Arigato for reviewing.

Silver Dragonfly: Yeah, I really didn't want to repeat the original but wanted to keep the atmosphere the same so I had everything presented through Naruto's new perception, considering he had *never* met the other characters before now. nn It's just looking at the same thing from a different perspective, and it all looks completely different. Yeah. I don't like Kankuro very much so even / enjoyed kicking his butt. I agree with the Sakura Vs Ino comment, I mean, logically speaking Sakura would win, but then again, because of their rivalry, I don't think Ino would live it down, especially after what she saw Sakura do in the forest of Death. nn Well, we'll both see in the upcoming chapters.

Sorry for the long wait people, but know that this chapter is LONG!!! The longest chapter yet! So enjoy.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. **PEOPLE WHO HAVEN'T READ NARUTO BOOK 5 AND 6 WILL HAVE PROBLEMS FOLLOWING THIS CHAPTER!!** Please for those who have NOT read the book, don't feel discouraged, give me an email and I might find a way to retype the chapter and send it to you directly with all the holes filled in. Oh... warning.. uh.. LOTS OF SWEARING!!

I'm also trying to pack in a hell of a lot of events into one chapter so I might revert back into my fast-paced writing. I hope you guys don't mind, I'm just kinda desperate to move onto the **really interesting**

parts when my OC reveals herself after the prelims. There will be a lot of swapping perspectives because sometimes, Naruto isn't located where the action is, so I'll be focusing on Sasuke and Sakura (sort of like the Haku Vs Naruto part) – switching point of views.

Um... about the names of jutsus... Most of the time, I prefer using the Japanese names with the English translations in brackets placed afterwards. However, if I have a technique that I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE JAPANESE NAME IS I'll just be using the English ones instead. Kay?

I'd also like everyone to thank SS (one of my friends) and Insanity (for suggesting the same thing) for helping me design the 2nd Tenkun no buki, presented in this Chapter. If it wasn't for them, I probably won't have created this particular Tenkun no buki in the first place. Give them both a big applause (especially SS for literary creating the damn thing from scratch).

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 7

Upon reaching their destination, the Forest of Death, the remaining 18 teams (1) of Genins all settled down on the ground waiting for Anko's explanation of the second test in the Chuunin Exam.

"This place is creepy..." Naruto heard Sakura whispered beside him and had to agree.

The giant trees that loomed ahead of them gave off a sense of eeriness that was hard to dispel. The sensation of danger

surrounding the forest like a thick blanket, gave the impression of a spider patiently waiting for the fly.

"Before we start the second test, you must all sign these documents." Anko announced holding up a packet of papers. "This is to ensure your perspective countries that if you die in this next test, it was not our responsibility." She continued with a bright smile on her face.

Naruto's eyebrow twitched. Geese... She's cheery about our deaths. He thought sarcastically. Just get on with it!

Continuing on, Anko gave the genins a detailed description of what was expected of them – what they must accomplish in order to pass the second test . There were no specific rules in how they accomplish the task as long as they complete it within the time limit and still remain in their original group of three.

Frowning at Anko's explanation, Naruto mentally went over all the details again. A 50% chance of getting either a Heaven scroll or an Earth scroll, simple enough... Less than half the teams here will pass this test, due the amount offighting as well as survival. Also an adequate observation... Five-day time limit, normal... Now, the disqualification rules... lose a scroll, don't pass... lose a team member, don't pass. All of these rules are pretty obvious. Except the last one, I wonder what would happen if we did open the scrolls before we reach the tower... Oh well, I'm not taking the chance no matter what the temptation might be.

After reading all the conditions, signing the forms and receiving their Heaven scroll, Naruto and company started towards gate 12, their designated gate into the forest of Death, as well as the beginning of the second Chuunin exam.

Only a few minutes into the exam, the members of team 7 all heard an unnatural scream in the distance. They paused in their careful trek towards the tower and shivered slightly at the sound.

"That was a human scream... right?" Sakura asked, warily.

Naruto nodded silently to Sakura, watching her shiver again. After a few seconds more of silence, the group turned away as one and started on their journey again, only to be stopped by Naruto this time.

Naruto suddenly paused in mid-stride, waiting and listening to his surrounding. He then turned back to his team members and asked them in silence, lifting his eyebrows in question. 'Did you sense that we're being followed?' (2)

The both of them looked intently at him, giving him a tight nod each, acknowledging his silent question as well as answering him with an 'affirmative' response. The corners of Naruto's mouth slowly curved upwards into a smirk. Well, well, well. Looks like the action is gonna start immediately. His smirk firmly in place, Naruto nodded back at his teammates giving them his permission to take on the enemy without his help.

Naruto suddenly threw a kunai in the direction of the invisible interloper. Releasing his invisibility Genjutsu, the formerly hidden man barely managed to dodge the kunai but revealed him-self in the process. The masked enemy, wearing the head protector of a Rain Genin, immediately tried to hide again and escape the on-coming battle. However, he was already too late.

While Naruto had done his bit in revealing the interloper, Sasuke had instantly activated his Sharingan and launched himself at the enemy with Sakura right beside him throwing several chakra-enhanced kunai at the man.

"Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!" (Fire type: Mythical Fire Flower no Jutsu) Sasuke performed the seal quickly and discharged many small fireballs at the enemy, whom had to zigzag his way through dodging the attack. The man avoided the fire blast and in return, threw several kunai with explosion notes attached to them towards Sasuke and Sakura. The man's kunais impacted against Sakura's

own kunais and a resulting blast could be heard throughout the forest.

Both Sasuke and Sakura had already increased the amount of Chakra on their feet upon seeing the incoming explosion; this lead them to be even faster than before, and they easily jumped away, avoiding the giant blast caused by the explosion notes.

The man was surprised however when Sakura's kunais continued on their way, advancing towards him, even after the giant explosion in the air. Sakura had enhanced those kunais with her charka control; they'll keep going towards the enemy no matter what was blocking their way. The man dodged the kunais as best he could but eventually ran out of space to move and was struck on his chest by one then followed by the other kunais, slamming him to a near by tree.

Sasuke followed up with another seal. "Gokakyu no Jutsu!"
(Powerful Fireball no Jutsu)

Sasuke released the giant fire breath, aimed directly at the enemy. However, the man, seeing the giant fireball coming his way, immediately formed seals of his own to escape. Upon finishing the seal, the man seemingly merged into the tree behind him. The resulting blast of Sasuke's fireball burnt the tree but the man was nowhere to be seen.

Sakura frowned at that development and quickly started forming seals of her own. "Genjutsu Kai!" (Genjutsu Deflection)

She called upon the Jutsu that had been taught to her by sensei Kakashi; dispelling the other man's own Genjutsu since hers was more direct.

The man, having his Genjutsu dispelled so easily by a twelve year old no less, was suddenly angry at how these two brats were easily beating him. He tried to escape the battle but found himself unable to move from the spot on the ground. Looking down, the two Konoha

brats surprised the man again, his legs were completely swallowed up by the ground up to his ankles and no matter what he did, and he simply couldn't move them.

"Doton: Dosou no Jutsu!" (Earth type: Earth Claw no Jutsu) (3).

Sasuke announced as both of his hands slammed onto the ground. Kakashi had taught him this Jutsu just days ago. Using his Chakra to direct the attack, Sasuke was able to make the earth itself swallow his opponent's feet into the ground, rendering them immovable.

Sakura immediately advanced towards their enemy and started fighting him with hand-to-hand combat while trying to tie him up with a string (pulled out from her ninja bag). The man tried to fend off her attacks but to no avail. Eventually, both his hands and legs were tied so Sasuke released his jutsu. Sakura proceeded to search through the man's clothes but she frowned when she couldn't find the scroll.

"His teammates aren't here so he's probably working alone. It wouldn't be surprising if he didn't have the scroll." Naruto told them nonchalantly from the sidelines. He had avoided the entire fight by staying on the outskirts of the fight, intent on simply watching how much his teammates had improved. And from what he had seen of their performance, he was very proud of their achievement.

Sighing in disappointment at not completing their task immediately, Sakura rendered the man unconscious with a Genjutsu sleep spell she placed on him. "Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu" (Forced Sleep no Jutsu)! (4)

Kakashi had taught Sakura this genjutsu technique. It can render the opponent asleep for however long the user wants them to, but depended on how much chakra the user uses and how far the user will be. In this case, she made the man asleep for the next 8 hours.

Leaving the tied up man the way he was, team 7 continued on their journey towards the tower. Looking at Sasuke's slightly angry face

and Sakura's disappointed expression, Naruto tried to lighten their mood with some conversation.

"Hey. Don't look so down, it's not like we're racing against time or anything. Just because the first guy we fought didn't get us the scroll we wanted, but that's nothing to feel bad about. And anyway, I think you two did pretty well."

Smiling slightly at their shocked expressions, Naruto continued on his way, not looking back at his stunned ex-students. It was well known to both Sakura and Sasuke that Naruto never ever praises anyone unless he thought they have done exceptionally well. To be able to wiggle praise out of him was almost as impossible as motivating him when they first met, so the fact that he had voluntarily approved of their growth was quite amazing.

Sasuke smirked in response. "Hn. You better be careful. I'll be catching up to you very soon, so you better notice *me* and prepare to get off your high horse!"

"Ha. I'd like to see you try, Uchiha. I'd like to see you try." Naruto rebuffed against Sasuke's arrogant comment.

Sakura only smiled at both the boy's antics. Sasuke has finally admitted to himself that Naruto may be currently superior in strength, but that has not dampened his spirits. In fact, now, he tries even harder to become stronger, just so he can one day show Naruto who was really the strongest. And Naruto, on the other hand, encouraged Sasuke to grow; so that one-day they will be able to fight on equal terms. Their rivalry is something to admire, I think. Sighing silently, Sakura continued with her silent thoughts. I hope I can continue to become stronger. I don't want to be left behind ever again.

A few hours later, team 7 could be found resting under a giant tree's canopy. They had opted to take their time and wait for their opponents to come to them. This strategy turned out to be counter-productive.

Suddenly, Naruto tensed in anticipation. He had felt something unnatural in the air that surrounded them. Looking up towards his teammates, he could tell that Sasuke had already felt the presence of something or someone underground listening in on their conversations, Sakura was still unaware. All of a sudden, the sound of birds and insects in the surrounding environment turn quiet, and not a sound could be heard. Naruto tensed further more and frowned, starting to feel slightly anxious with trepidation. This is not good. If the animals can feel how deadly this guy is, then there's probably a good reason for it.

Deciding that this opponent was probably too powerful for his teammates, Naruto turned to them once again, intending to tell them to run, but it was already too late. Out of nowhere, a giant gust of wind blew into their temporary resting place.

Sakura screamed at the onslaught and Sasuke yelled at them to grab hold of something, anything. Unfortunately, Naruto was standing directly in the path of the wind and so anything he grabbed onto was also pulled along with the strong squall of unnatural air. Naruto had no choice but to cover his eyes and mouth and hope that he won't be landing too far away from his comrades.

Finally, the wind subsided, and Naruto was able to open his eyes, only to see a giant brown snake, its huge jaws wide open, and ready to swallow him whole. Naruto tried to run away but after tumbling through the large windstorm, his limbs were sluggish and he found himself wrapped up by the giant snake's tail. Fighting to move his arms and hands to create some kind of seal, any seal, or even just to find a weapon, Naruto fought furiously against the binds of the snake coils but to no avail.

Naruto closed his eyes tightly as he felt the snake's mouth close in around him and felt the inner muscles swallow him whole. GOD IT STINKS IN HERE!!!!Angrily, Naruto cursed himself for being too relaxed. STUPID! STUPID! STUPID!!! GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE NOW!!!Pushing his hands together and forcing the muscles around

him away, Naruto quickly formed a seal that would help him blast his way out of the throat of the snake that had just swallowed him.

Kakuryuu Hon no Jutsu!!!(Black Dragon Flame) (5) Finishing the seal, a giant ball of black flame automatically surged out of Naruto's left palm, It continued to grow in size, forcing the snake's inner muscles to burn and expand. After a time, Naruto decided it's time to stop the build up of black flames and release the dragon within the flaming egg (before he burns his own hands). Creating one more hand seal as a sign of release, the giant ball of burning flames suddenly exploded. Naruto immediately covered his eyes and ears from the release of the creature within.

A giant roar accompanied the birth of a Black Fire Dragon spirit as it easily burned and ripped its way out of the snake's throat. Escaping from the blood and gore of the snake's carcass slowly being burnt away by the Kakuryuu's (Black Dragon's) flames, Naruto breathed in a large gulp of fresh air. He then nodded to his half-summoned, half-created fire spirit and asked it mentally to help him find his friends. The flaming spirit while twirling and floating in mid-air acknowledged Naruto's plea for help with a short nod and immediately launched itself flying through the trees towards where it could smell battle and blood, burning anything within its path. Naruto followed the speeding spirit as best he could and prayed that he wasn't too late to help.

===== Same time as Naruto being eaten...

Sasuke took several moments to catch his breath. He had just barely hidden himself in time to avoid the on-coming squall of wind that had separated him from his teammates. Listening for any extra movement for a time, Sasuke eventually got up out of his hiding place to start looking for his companions.

He only took a few steps before Sakura came out of hiding opposite of him. Sasuke stood still and looked back at her while Sakura in turn, reacted in relief at seeing him. Narrowing his eyes in slight suspicion, Sasuke determinately pointed a finger at Sakura and

asked her: "If you are the real Sakura, tell me what is Kakashi sensei's favourite book called?"

Catching on to his suspicions, Sakura immediately straightened herself studiously, as if to impress him. "Icha, Icha, Paradise." She said confidently.

Sasuke gave an inaudible sigh of relief and slowly lowered his finger. At the same time, Sakura literally jumped to his side, she's still a bit shocked at the previous events and would feel much better if they were together.

Suddenly, sounds of bushes being moved reached the two genin's ears and they tensed instantly, almost drawing out their kunais in defence only to see Naruto stride nonchalantly out of the nearby bush. This time, Sakura gave a sigh in relief, at least now; she's with both her teammates. Sasuke continued to be tense with suspicion however.

Holding his kunai in Naruto's direction, he demanded to know. "Naruto! What is your favourite food? Answer or I'll attack!"

Naruto stopped smiling and tilted his head in a confused manner. "What does that have to do with anything, Sasuke?"

The following reaction was immediate; Sasuke threw his power-enhanced kunai at the impostor. The impostor dodged the attack easily, proving once and for all that he wasn't the real Naruto. The real Naruto, though powerful would probably try to block the attack instead of dodging it, because the distance between the two to begin with was too short for even him to dodge the incoming attack completely.

With a wide smirk, the impostor released his Henge no Jutsu (Transformation skill) to reveal himself as a ninja from the Hidden Grass Village. The man took off his straw hat and revealed underneath his long black hair.

"Heh. Heh. So you saw through my transformation. Very impressive." The man hissed out as he continued to smirk at the two Konoha genins. His tongue rolled out of his mouth slowly and swiped delicately over his lips and jaw. Sakura's eyes widened at how long the man's tongue was.

Displaying his Earth scroll, the man continued. "You want my *Earth* scroll, right? However, you're gonna have to try harder than that to get it." The man gave a haughty laugh and then wrapped his incredibly long tongue around the object. Slowly but surely, to both Sakura and Sasuke's horror, the man *swallowed* his own scroll. Touching delicately over one of his eyes, the man glared directly at the two genins. "Now... let's begins, shall we..."

Immediately, Sasuke and Sakura both froze in horror as their minds were attacked by the deep bloodlust of their opponent. Pain, fear, blood, screaming, these four sensations ran through their body and mind continuously. They watched in vague understanding as their own body were being slashed, ripped apart, burnt, beheaded, and still manage to carry on screaming in pain and shock. As abruptly as the torture began, it just...stopped.

Both instantly fell onto their knees and sat on the ground heavily, gasping for breath as they tried to re-orientate themselves in their present surroundings. No blood, no pain, but then why was their bodies still shaking. Genjutsu!went through both their minds. However, identifying the problem and actually overcoming the problem was two different things. They may have realised that what they had felt was not real, that what they thought happened, hadn't, but the fear they both felt now...that was very real.

We have to run. We have to run. We have to run. There's no way we can take this guy on!This litany kept on repeating inside Sasuke's mind. He looked to his side and watched in anguish as Sakura freely cried while still shaking from the impact of what she had seen. If we don't run, we'll die!!!Sasuke realised in panic.

Slowly but surely, Sasuke moved his shaking hand to grasp onto a kunai with all of his will. We've got to move. MOVE!!! DAMN IT ALL! MOVE!!! He watched in slight horror as the man casually flicked two kunais in their direction, Sasuke instantly slammed his own kunai onto his own thigh and finally found enough strength to launch himself off the ground. He grabbed onto Sakura on his way up and ran like all hell was breaking loose.

Jumping from tree to tree, desperate to get some distance between himself and the predator that followed, Sasuke's panic mind continued to scream at him to run and never stop. However, even he needed time to breathe and recover. Finding a safely hidden area within a tree, he shakily deposited Sakura and slumped down himself.

Sakura blinked several times, trying desperately to gather her scattered wits together. It wasn't until she heard Sasuke whimper in pain as he pulled his kunai out of his own thigh and watched in slight fascination and sickness as the blood slowly oozed out of the wound, that she finally came out of her trance. Ignoring how scared she had been just a few minutes ago, she quickly searched through her own pack (strapped to her waist) for bandages, finding the appropriate article, she began to wrap up Sasuke's injury while the boy in question kept on darting glances around in terror, looking for their predator.

Finished with the bandages, Sakura watched in shock and nervousness as Sasuke continued to panic. I've never seen Sasuke-kun so scared before. She thought slightly detached. She tensed suddenly as a snake slowly slid down from a branch above them. She tried to warn Sasuke but the boy, being in his panicked state, immediately shoved his hand onto her mouth to silence her and continued on gazing around his immediate surrounding.

Sakura stared in horror and frustration as Sasuke ignored her. Finding as much strength within her, she decided on taking action herself. With her free hand, she grabbed onto her own kunai, enhanced it with power, waited until the right moment before

slamming the kunai deep into the head of the snake, shocking both the snake and Sasuke.

Sasuke instinctively jumped in reaction as he felt Sakura attack him, but when he saw the dead body of a giant snake resting on the tree he had just vacated, he understood that she wasn't attacking him; she was saving him by attacking the snake. IDIOT! He chided himself mentally. DAMN IT! I WAS PANICKING SO MUCH I DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE THE SNAKE!!

Landing himself on a nearby branch, he looked towards Sakura who was on another branch and nodded to her in gratitude for her rescue. If she hadn't attacked the snake, he may well have been lunch. However, his gratitude soon turned to horror as the scales on the deceased snake's head slowly ripped open and revealed the same man that they had been trying to run away from.

"Being the prey, you can never relax, only keep on running. Especially when you are hunted by a predator..." The man's tongue lapped around his face to clean up all the saliva from the deceased snake.

Before he could launch himself on his prey however, a giant roar in the near distance could be heard. Soon, a large and strange flaming creature rushed pass, in between Sasuke and Sakura, aiming directly towards the strange but dangerous snake man. Seconds later, Naruto revealed himself, landing not some distance away from his compatriots.

"NARUTO!" Sakura screamed in relief. Finally, she no longer had to face this dangerous creature alone with only a panicked Sasuke by her side. Though she never admitted it out loud, it was obvious that Naruto was the strongest in their group. And if they were working together, perhaps they could win against this opponent. Sasuke too, gave a small sigh in relief as his other team member joined him.

Trying to regain some semblance of balance and confidence, Sasuke shouted back at the annoying blonde. "What took you so

long , slowpoke?"

Naruto did not deign to reply but concentrated on watching and analysing how this new enemy easily dodged all the attacks from his Fire Dragon. He frowned as he continued to watch the snake man perform several water jutsus that a ninja of the grass country could never have learned. This guy is NOT a GENIN!! He is strong... Naruto clenched his teeth together. Probably stronger than me...

Indeed, the battle between his trusty Fire spirit and the enemy was not going well at all. Upon reaching the clearing, the Black Dragon Spirit immediately launched itself at the enemy. The man slithered and jumped from tree to tree like a snake, avoiding all of the Dragon's fire blasts and fire balls. Getting irritated, the Black Dragon pursued its prey doggedly, following its track up, down, around trees and branches, over the ground, through the air, pretty much everyway. The Dragon tried to swallow its prey and burn him from within its fiery stomach. However, after finally cornering the man and upon contact on the man' skin, said skin began to swivel up and burn due to the close proximity of the Dragon Spirit. Naruto noted that the man was no longer there, only his snake skin.

Finding its opponent appearing somewhere behind it, the Dragon spirit roared in anger, turning itself around in mid-air and tried to charge its prey again. But this time, the prey was ready. "Suiten: Water Dragon Blast no Jutsu!" (6) yelled the man as he completed his long list of seals. Upon completion, the man grunted and poured huge amounts of water from his mouth. The water formed and moulded itself into a giant Water Dragon ready to attack Naruto's own Fire Dragon. Naruto tensed, he knew how this confrontation would end.

Just as he expected, the water Dragon formed by the enemy gobbled up his own Fire spirit. But being a spirit, the Dragon did not give up until it was completely obliterated. It continued to force the water that surrounded it into perspiration, while the Water Dragon Jutsu deteriorated itself after its attack. Soon however, both dragons

were drained of their innate Chakra and both died out forming a draw between the two opponents.

Naruto straightened himself and finally looked back at his two uneasy comrades. His silence had made them very nervous and watching the result of the battle, they had a feeling they would not like what Naruto was about to tell them. Indeed, they didn't want to hear what came next at all.

Naruto didn't want to lie and didn't even try to reassure them that they could take this guy on. However, he did give them a very determined look instead and calmly told them what to do. "Sasuke, Sakura. Get out of here now."

"WHAT!!" Sakura shouted back at him in mild shock and Sasuke shivered in slight fear.

Naruto shook his head to emphasize his point. "You can't take this guy on. He's on a completely different level to all of us."

Trying to summon her wits back, Sakura asked him: "Then aren't you coming with us?"

"No. I'll keep him busy; you two immediately run towards the tower and tell the people there that there is an intruder in the forest. This guy is no Genin." Naruto answered her calmly and detachedly.

"But..."

"GO SAKURA! SASUKE! THAT'S AN ORDER!!" Naruto screamed at them both.

Deciding to take action, Sasuke jumped to where Sakura was, grabbed onto her securely and started jumping away from the scene. Turning their back on their fellow comrade, they could hear his last orders. "DON'T TURN BACK!" Shutting his eyes in shame and a little self-hate, Sasuke proceeded to leave the vicinity as fast as he possibly could.

Finally, both his teammates are no longer within sight of the new battle arena, and Naruto released his breath. Now, the real battle began.

As if a silent countdown had reached zero, both combatants immediately launched into their initial attacks. The snake man performed several seals quickly just as Naruto was trying to counter with his own seals. Biting his right thumb to draw blood, Naruto completed his seals as fast as he could and then slammed both of his open palms together and shouted as he released his Chakra. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Tenkun no buki! Come forth! Kakuhouou no Hane! (Summoning no Jutsu! Black Phoenix Feather!)"

Upon completing the summoning, Naruto felt a very hot presence on his back. He literary *felt* all of his Chakra being drained from the rest of his body to start forming the wings on his back. He would never forget the first time he had used this Tenkun no buki during his training sessions with them almost 2 years ago.

[FLASHBACK] There you go, a flashback into the time of Naruto's training with my OC – OC not exactly present at the moment...

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Kakuhouou no Hane!" A hot flash of pain burned a strange tattoo on a ten-year-old Naruto's back as he summoned forth this Tenkun no buki. Of all the Tenkun no buki, this was the only one that was directly attached to the user's flesh. Others, like the Ginshi no Himo, may have had metal strings stabbed into his veins to suck Chakra, but they were nothing compared to the extent of human flesh and blood consumed by the Kakuhouou no hane during its formation stages.

His shirt was discarded earlier and so he could easily see what the tattoo on his back had looked like from across the mirror in front of him, directing his gaze to the mirror behind him. The tattoo had a central oval shaped orb, ruby red in colour and currently burning brightly as it continued to suck up Naruto's Chakra. It pulsed like a

living creature, slowly growing in size and power, like a parasite feeding off its host.

Soon, black feather-like patterns are formed surrounding the red orb; more and more of them appear until the whole of his upper body's backside was filled to the brim with theses feathers-like tattoos. Now came the pain.

Naruto instantly fell on one knee, unable to withhold his scream of pain as he felt sharp blade-like objects slowly forcing its way out of his skin. Looking at the mirror, Naruto was shocked to see that the previously flat feather patterns were becoming real, and were slowly poking its way through his skin and forming real feathers. He screamed again at the agony of having his flesh ripped apart, his back muscles strained and burning as it was also being consumed in the process for the Tenkun no buki to grow it's own appendages. The feathers grew in size, and when reaching its final stage was pushed forward again by those feathers underneath the ones that had formed.

It was an agonisingly slow process for all the feathers to slowly emerge right out of Naruto's backside. He continued to scream in pain as all of his lifeblood were either consumed by the absorption process to create the wings on his back, or were surely flowing out of him in gallons as the feathers continue to pierce his skin.

Minutes dragged on like hours until finally, the wings were complete. If he were to stretch them he would find that they have a wingspan of about 3 metres each and could fold in among them to comfortably hold themselves behind his back.

The weight they added to the small child's back was definitely something to get use to as well as the flight abilities that they had enabled their new master. It took him months just to learn how to control his extra limbs well enough to even attempt flight and even longer for him to learn all the different attacks that can be done with these magical wings. And it took even longer for him to learn how to

speed up the process of agonising minutes into a short 10-second leap of intense pain but well worth the effort for the final form.

Eventually, the pain of using this Tenkun no buki subsided just like all the other pains that Naruto had gone through and accepted, he had simply gotten use to the pain and it became ignorable.

[END FLASHBACK]

Back to the present, the same sensations ran through Naruto just as his first time with the Kakuhouou no Hane, but this time, the process went too fast for him to scream in pain or even react in any fashion. Soon, he had fully formed the reddish-black wings behind him, shredding his shirt and jacket apart in the process.

Each feather tip was sharp and deadly with poison. Contact upon one of the spikes and the opponent would die eventually, there was no cure for the Black Phoenix's poison feathers. Completing his transformation, Naruto made another Katon seal and ignited his wings with fire. Unlike normal fire, the flames that accompany his wings were black. All it took was a small spark to re-ignite the full power of the deceased phoenix, and this time, Naruto had enough control over its powers to not lead to his own downfall like the first time he had used it.

Glancing back at his opponent, the man had just completed his own seal and launched his attack at Naruto. "Doton: Doryuudan!" (Earth type: Earth Dragon Missile) (7) Yelled the man, as a giant head of an Earth/mud dragon appeared beside him on the ground. The mud dragon opened its giant jaws and immediately spurted out large balls of mud at Naruto, whom was still standing on a large tree branch.

Naruto instantly jumped off the tree to avoid the incoming mud balls. Flapping his new wings a few times lifted him many metres above the treetop and easily avoided all of the missiles that his opponent was trying to aim at him. The man, realising this attack pattern was useless, released his Jutsu and the Earth Dragon soon disappeared back into the ground.

"Is that one of the infamous Tenkun no buki?" The man smirked at Naruto, whom was still flying up in the air.

Naruto glared back at him with eyes full of hate and righteous anger. HOW DARE HE MOCK ME!!!"You *a*lways smell like a treacherous snake! OROCHIMARU! Don't think I don't know you, one of the three legendary Sennin of the Hidden Leaf, now nothing by a common S-class criminal." He sneered back at his opponent.

The smirk disappeared instantly from Orochimaru's face. "I didn't think you would recognise me, brat." Orochimaru decided then that it would be more productive for him to finish off this fight with Jiraiya's unofficial student quickly, so that he may chase after Sasuke. Decision made, he summoned two of his famous giant snakes, though this time, he didn't intend to use Manda.

"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" Slamming both his palms onto the ground, immediately two giant snakes were summoned. They were larger than the one Naruto had fought before hand, and stood towering over the clearing. Orochimaru stood impeccably on top of one of the snake's head and returned to smirking at Naruto. "Now the fun begins... brat." Naruto had a feeling that he would regret his decision to ever take on one of the three Sennins but for now, he had a score to settle with the snake man.

After half an hour's worth of running away from the battle, Sakura and Sasuke were still many hours away from actually reaching the tower. Sasuke was up ahead and continued to ignore the sounds of a fierce battle in the distance. Don't think about it! Just don't think about it.

Sakura on the other hand, trailing further and further behind him, started to give in to her doubts about whether the course they were taking was actually the right course of action. Thinking back to all the times that Naruto had pulled them out of a bind, she started feeling more and more depressed. Am I... am I still so weak? Did I even

improve ?She asked herself silently but then shook her head in denial. No, I've become stronger... I know I have.

Pushing more Chakra into her feet to increase her pace, she easily caught up to Sasuke. Even though Sasuke had more Chakra in reserve than her, but she still had finer control. And one of the best features about having fine control over her Chakra was that she could easily manipulate it to enhance any part of her body within an instance and still not waste a drop of it.

Jumping from treetop to treetop, Sakura took some time to look at Sasuke's expression from the side. He's afraid. So am I. Resolutely looking forward and telling herself again and again that her mission was to inform the Examiners of an infiltrator. However, no matter what she tried to tell herself, her heart just wasn't in it to find an excuse. I'm running away... running away from my friend, my teammate, my comrade, whom may very well be dead because of us...

Sakura could feel tears sting in her eyes as she tried to push the impulse down. God... why do I feel like I just abandoned someone who trusted me... Closing her eyes for a brief moment, she remembered a time when she had made a promise to herself. A promise that demanded her to become stronger, to stop being so useless, to stop hiding behind other people's protection, to stop her loved ones from being hurt. What did I say again... oh yes.

[FLASH BACK] Part of Chapter 3, You can ignore it if you want

Sakura made a silent promise to herself then, she wants to improve the relationship between the members of team 7 so that they will never feel so isolated again, especially Naruto. She really wanted all three of them to work as a team.

[END FLASHBACK]

And look what I'm doing NOW!!! Running away! I'm leaving him alone again! I'm isolating him again! I'm... I'm... such a hypocrite and

a COWARD! Her inner self screamed at her conscience and Sakura stopped jumping subconsciously.

Sasuke, noticing that Sakura had stopped moving, also stopped in his progress to ask her what was wrong. "Sakura? Come on, we have to keep on going! We have..."

Sakura interrupted him in mid-sentence. "I'm not going."

Sasuke blinked at her and quickly scanned his or her surroundings to make sure no one was listening. "Sakura?!"

"I'm sorry, Sasuke-kun. But I can't leave Naruto behind. I can't help feeling that I've betrayed him somehow." Blinking back tears, Sakura nodded to herself as she made her decision. "I'm going back."

"ARE YOU INSANE!!??" Sasuke shouted back at her, completely stunned at what she was instigating. "Look, Sakura. There is NO way we can beat that guy! He's out of our league. We have to run. Even Naruto said we have to run! Do you want to die so badly, Sakura?!" Sasuke demanded, trying to force some common sense into her, but to no avail.

Sakura turned her back on Sasuke. "I'm sorry, Sasuke-kun. I know our top priority right now is to warn the others, but I just can't turn my back on a friend who is fighting a losing battle just to protect us. I don't want to live a life full of guilt later on. I almost lost you in the fight against Haku..." Fighting against her tears, Sakura knew that this was the very first time she had ever denied her crush anything. "I don't want to go through that again and lose Naruto this time. You're both too important to me. Please, go on ahead without me. I... thank you for your concern."

And with that said, Sakura immediately launched herself back towards her friend and comrade, not ever turning around to look at the shocked expression on Sasuke's face.

"SAKURA THIS IS SUICIDE! IF WE GO BACK THERE WE'LL DIE TOO!" Sasuke screamed at the top of his lungs, trying to convince himself as well as his teammate that what they were doing was right. It had to be right... but even his fear could not suppress the wave of self-hatred that churned inside of him. WHY AM I SO WEAK!!!!???

Shutting his eyes tightly, Sasuke remembered those horrible words that his own brother had said to him the day of the Uchiha massacre.

[FLASHBACK] Um... You guys all know this. It's ignorable.

"Foolish brother. If you want to kill me... then hate, spite!! And survive pathetically!! Run and run... and cling desperately to life!"

[END FLASHBACK]

Bidding the memories away, Sasuke suddenly felt a fresh surge of hate and anger inside of him. Some directed at his hateful brother, but most on himself. NO!!! Opening his eyes, a new wave of determination overlayed the hatred and anger. This was a determination born of trust, not for vengeance. I always believed that I have to live so that I can kill my brother one day. But if I don't even have enough courage to face this guy... Then what chances do I have against my brother? NO!! I won't runaway anymore! I can't runaway anymore.

Breathing deeply to calm himself, Sasuke immediately launched himself back towards the direction they had come from, following Sakura's trail. I don't want to lose the people close to me either...not ever again.

"Shit!" Naruto cursed to himself as he dodged the tail of one of the snakes trying to grab onto him in midair. One against two is so bloody unfair! He thought as he quickly countered with his own attack.

Flapping his mighty wings once, Naruto directed a large barrage of burning feather arrows towards at the snake where Orochimaru stood atop. "Kaku Haneya!" (Black Feather Arrows) Naruto shouted his attack.

The snake escaped using its skin moulting technique (8) and dug underground to avoid further attacks. In the mean time, the second snake took this opportunity to try and bite Naruto from behind but Naruto was already prepared. Doing some quick hand seals, he pointed his last seal at the ground the snake was jumping off of and yelled: "Underground! Swamp of the Underworld!" (9) Immediately a giant swamp appeared directly underneath the large snake, making the snake as well as many of the surrounding trees to submerge into it completely. No matter how much the snake struggled, it only led to sinking faster and soon, the snake puffed out of existence altogether so Naruto released his Jutsu after that.

One down, one to go. Naruto mentally counted as he found himself taking deeper and deeper breaths. Damn, the Kakuhouou no Hane is really starting to hurt...Naruto winced slightly when he felt the Tenkun no buki burned off more of his muscle tissues to compensate for the burning arrow barrage that he had just used against Orochimaru to no success.

Mentally calculating how much longer he could last using the Kakuhouou no Hane, Naruto was caught completely in surprise when he felt hot acid splashed onto his right wing. The acid attacked and burned his black phoenix wings, eating away much of the feathers and flesh, displaying the black bones underneath. Naruto mentally scolded himself for being distracted during a battle and quickly turned around to face his enemy. Again to his shock, Naruto found himself directly in front of a giant snake's open mouth. Immediately closing what's left of his wings completely around him to protect himself, Naruto felt the jaws of the snake completely clamp him in.

DAMN IT! THAT'S THE SECOND TIME I'VE BEEN SWALLOWED BY A SNAKE TODAY!!!He fumed. And his anger fuelled his power as

Naruto slowly but surely felt the rage built up from inside of him. The same rage that had completely consumed him the first time he released his anger after discovering Ellie's body; the same rage that belonged to Kyuubi. It gave Naruto power, more power than he could handle but it also scared Naruto. He never wanted to lose himself again.

Clamping on the influx of hate and rage, Naruto threaded the power into a more controllable form. After all, I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. If Kyuubi feels frustrated enough to lend me his power without me asking, then I shouldn't complain either.(10)
Concentrating hard, Naruto directed Kyuubi's enormous power supply into healing his injured wings. Once done, Naruto immediately launched his counter-attack to escape the mouth of the snake.

"Hou Ou Fukatsu!" (Phoenix REBIRTH!) Naruto yelled from inside his safely enclosed wings as he built up the massive amounts of black fire and emitted it all out of his wings. The resulting giant sphere of firestorm quickly burnt the snake's flesh and freed Naruto from within its jaws. From a distance, the attack could be seen as a giant ball of white and black swirling in the atmosphere, just like a new sun being born or a small planet being destroyed. The light continued to glow and expand exponentially until it reached its peak power supply and just burst into millions of tiny light glittering in the surrounding trees. Right in the middle of the previous firestorm, Naruto could be seen hovering in midair, undaunted by Orochimaru's attacks and uninjured.

In one of the surrounding trees, Orochimaru glared hatefully at the boy. DAMN! It's harder to beat him than I thought! I'm wasting my time and this BRAT is starting to REALLY annoy me! He had been surprised when he felt part of the ancient Chakra belonging to Kyuubi actually emerging from the child's body. He had heard rumours that that the Kyuubi-brat was dead, or at least, that someone had tried to kill it 6 years ago. He had assumed that they had succeeded since no more news about the damnable brat was

later heard. Unfortunately for him, he not only had to deal with just any brat tutored by none other than his eternal rival, Jiraiya, it just had to turn out to be the Kyuubi's container as well. CURSE THEM ALL! Orochimaru was through being nice, he was threw playing, now, this time it's serious.

Opening his mouth and tilting his head, a small snake emerged from Orochimaru's throat. Opening its mouth a sword's tilt was pushed out of it. Orochimaru reached for the tilt and drew out his favourite weapon, the Kusanagi. Ready to attack, Orochimaru took some time to do another complicated and long sequenced seal, once he finished, he slammed his hands on the ground again. "Doton: Doryuuoh no jutsu!" (Earth Type: Earth Dragon no jutsu!) (11)

A loud rumbling sound followed the activation of the Jutsu. By that time, Naruto had verified the location of Orochimaru and was just about to launch himself at his enemy, a giant Dragon's head had emerged from the ground. Expecting only just the head, Naruto was stunned when a long neck followed the stone Dragon's head, and then followed by a large body and claws present by its side. Naruto's mouth hung agape at the enormous foe that Orochimaru had created without using any summoning technique. It was even larger than the two snakes that Naruto had just defeated.

Naruto gulped nervously, he was running low on Chakra, even with the added bonus of Kyuubi's power healing up all his previous injuries, he's still finding it very difficult to come up against Orochimaru. Damn it! All of the previous fights, I didn't even land a single hit on Orochimaru. Yes, I may have defeated his snakes but they're nothing compared to him. The master is always stronger than the summon itself. SHIT!! Naruto swore as the Earth Dragon roared its displeasure, opened its huge jaws and started hurling giant balls of mud towards Naruto.

Naruto desperately manoeuvred himself, dodging all of the Dragon's attacks and managed to launch his own Kaku Haneya (Black Feather Arrows) back at it, but the attacks just got stuck on the hard stone surface without penetrating the Dragon itself. Naruto decided

that fleeing would be a good option right about now and immediately tried to distance himself from the raging Dragon, flapping his wings desperately to get some leverage, Naruto didn't notice that Orochimaru had just appeared right in front of him because he was too focused on the Dragon behind him.

Naruto came to an abrupt halt in midair but was too slow to avoid Orochimaru's attack. "Senei Jyashu" (Sublime Snake Hands), Orochimaru shouted as he directed many snakes to appear from his right arm's sleeve. The snakes stretched through the air, wrapped themselves completely around Naruto (excluding his wings) and left Orochimaru free to attack. Naruto yelled in surprise and tried desperately to manoeuvre his wings to cut all the snakes off of him. However, with every scratch, he began injuring more of himself than the snakes and they were curling tighter and tighter around him. Behind him, Naruto could still hear the slow advancement of the Earth Dragon and in front, Orochimaru was preparing to stab him with the Kusanagi.

SHIT! I'm don't have time!Naruto thought frantically as he came up with a suicidal plan. Twisting himself in midair using his wings, so that his free left arm faced the incoming Orochimaru and his right arm faced the dragon, Naruto waiting for them to advance. Ignoring how the snakes curled around him trying to slowly crush his lungs, Naruto concentrated Chakra onto the palm of both his hands while trying to hide it from his opponents. Swirling and twisting, the Chakra continued to flow faster and faster until all the eye could see was a seemingly perfect sphere. Finally, within milliseconds of being crushed on both sides, Naruto released one of his most powerful attacks.

"Rasengan!!!!" Naruto yelled as he pushed the concentrated Chakra ball out of his left palm so that it may soar through the air and hit Orochimaru. At the exact moment, Naruto manoeuvred his wings so that he flew closer to the Earth Dragon, and slammed his other palm, the right-handed Rasengan, directly onto the head of the Dragon.

Given no time to dodge, Orochimaru placed his beloved Kusanagi in front of him and concentrated, forming a Chakra force field to protect himself from the Rasengan. F==K! I've never seen the Rasengan being *thrown* before! The impact of Naruto's Chakra ball onto Orochimaru's sword and shield was so strong that it sent Orochimaru flying through the air.

At the same time, the impact of the Rasengan's concentrated power shattered through out all the stone structures forming the Earth Dragon. Shattering and crumbling, what was left of the original Earth dragon eventually disintegrated into soft soil, landing onto the ground below. Naruto, too exhausted from using one of his ultimate attacks, could no longer hold up the Kakuhouou no Hane. He had to release his Tenkun no buki and he had to release it NOW.

Struggling to form the seal, Naruto eventually dispelled his Tenkun no buki. Instantly, a hot flash of pain burned all around his back, especially his shoulders where his flesh and blood had been consumed to regenerate the wings. His scream of agony helped distract him from his direct fall from midair onto the ground. For a small eternity, all Naruto could feel was pain, the pain compounded even more when he dimly felt himself slamming onto the softened soil underneath him. He vaguely noted that the hardened stone of the Earth Dragon became soft enough to take his fall without killing him. And he also noted that the snakes had disappeared midway through his fall, probably because their master is no longer in the vicinity.

He groaned in pain as his eyesight started to turn grey in colour. SHIT! I'VE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE! His frantic mind noted, but his body protested every single movement he tried to perform. When Orochimaru comes around again, I'm a dead man for sure! I've got to... got to get away... But still, his body didn't move. Painfully turning his head to the side, Naruto saw that the sand underneath him had turned blood red.

He looked up as he caught some movement in the corner of his eye. Is that... Sakura? Indeed, his female teammate had pushed herself

quickly out of the surrounding bushes and immediately knelt beside him inspecting his injuries. He could clearly see her mouth moving but he couldn't hear anything and was too tired to even try to lip-read. Gomen ne... Sakura... Sasuke... I couldn't... I couldn't kill him...and with that last thought, Naruto fell into unconsciousness.

===== **Um... just a different perspective, that's all nn;**

Sasuke landed silently beside Sakura and looked over Naruto's injuries himself. What he saw frightened him. "Is he... is he dead?" He asked quietly.

Sakura shook her head vehemently. "NO! He's still breathing..." Fighting against tears, she continued but this time in a softer tone. "He's lost a lot of blood though... and I don't know what the hell happened to his back!" She said, as she looked at all the blood on the ground.

When the two genins had turned Naruto's back over for inspection, what they saw shocked them both beyond any horror movie they had ever seen. Naruto's back muscles were all clearly visible (or what's left of them), and blood oozed out of all crevices. The arteries and veins can be seen desperately pumping blood into injured areas even though the blood itself would eventually find its way out of the body's system. In some parts (like the shoulder pads), even bones and the intricate ligaments binding what was left of the muscles together could be seen by the naked eye.

Sakura tried to fight against the nausea but soon lost. She turned away quickly and threw up, while Sasuke had to shut his eyes tightly and concentrate on regulating his breathing. Seeing Naruto so injured hurt his pride and it upped his self-hatred a notch, knowing that his comrade would have really died if they hadn't turned back.

"Oh god! Oh god! Oh god! Oh god!" Sakura choked and shuddered, trying desperately to pull herself together. He's not dead! He's not dead! He's not dead yet! GOD DAMN IT! Pull yourself together! He

needs you right now!!!Forcing herself to calm her breathing, Sakura pushed away all the fears of Naruto dieing and instead, focused on the lessons she had ever had learnt about how to react to injures and wounds. She may not have been a medic Nin, but anything she had ever learnt was photographically captured in her mind.

Making up her mind, she asked her other teammate for help. "Sasuke. Please. Help me get him up; we've got to bandage his wounds before it becomes infected." Her voice becoming calmer and calmer as she forced herself to concentrate on what to do now to help Naruto, not to dwell on what would have happened if they hadn't returned.

Bringing himself back from his own self-recrimination, Sasuke nodded. "Yeah. Okay. But we have to leave soon."

Shocked, Sakura glared at Sasuke. "WE ARE NOT LEAVING HIM BEHIND!"

Sasuke glared right back at her. "I never said that. We have to take him to a doctor ASAP! Whether we pass the exam or not is no longer important! Keeping Naruto alive IS! Not to mention, I don't think the guy we fought is dead yet, so he may well come after us. This place is not safe! We have to leave as soon as possible, for our own survival as well as Naruto's."

Stunned beyond silence, all Sakura could do was nod and the two of them quickly applied all that they had learnt about bandaging and how to help deter infection. Once done, Sasuke lifted the silent Naruto onto his back, piggy backing him and all three of them immediately set off on their way towards the tower once again.

What the two didn't notice in their haste, were two small foxes following them inconspicuously; one had golden brown fur, and the other, a darker brown fur. Both pairs of reddish-brown eyes completely focused on the blonde haired boy being carried away from the previous battle.

Several hundred metres away, Orochimaru stood dazedly and gazed at his surrounding. DAMN THAT BRAT! The next time I see him, HE'S DEAD!!!

(1) In the original manga/anime, there were 26 teams, but since Naruto didn't dispel their worries, there are less numbers in this story. Well... as long as the end result is 7 groups, who cares, right?!
nn

(2) Okay. I know this is highly improbable that they can communicate with each other using just their eyes or body language. It certainly didn't exist in the manga/anime between them, but it worked for the Jounins. Well, anyway, just work with me here, okay?! Naruto did spend a long time initially teaching them in the Wave country, so he had also taught them how to look for signs and communicate with hand gestures or certain looks from the eyes.

(3) Original Jutsu, I wanted something similar to the "Doton: Shinjuu Zanshu no Jutsu" (Earth type: Inner decapitation skill), used by Kakashi against Sasuke, but without the whole body being embedded in the Earth. nn

(4) Also another Original Jutsu. It's something similar to what Kabuto used in the actual Chuunin exam but this one is more on the small scale and uses less Chakra.

(5) This black flame is DIFFERENT to Itachi's black flame. This flame is ALIVE, that's why I called it a "spirit". This technique is an original Jutsu of mine that is partly summoning no Jutsu, and partly using his own Chakra to create a life form made out of natural elements. One of these days, I'm gonna have to write up a Jutsu's list (similar to TokehGecko's list) for you guys, ne.. nn;;; Oh well, this jutsu was inspired by Hiei from Yu Yu Hakusho, in fact, they have almost the same name..

(6) First used between Kakashi and Zabuza. Not sure if you can create that large amount of water just from the mouth, but lets

assume that people can, okay? nn;;;

(7) It's the one used in episode 69 of the Naruto anime by the 3rd Hokage. Not sure about the English Translation though, I made that up with some assumptions. Can anyone tell me if it's right?

(8) Book 19, Manda used it against Jiraiya and Gamabunta's Katon attack.

(9) Don't know what it's called in Japanese, anybody knows, please tell me. Um.. Naruto's version is =larger= than the one in book 19. nn

(10) I told you people before that Naruto and Kyuubi has a certain deal, right? Well, let's just say that Kyuubi has already granted Naruto part of his power, and that power is open to Naruto 24/7, however, any EXTRA Naruto will have to =ask= for it, and he's usually too proud to ask anyway. nn;;;

(11) I made it up. nn;; Basically it's like the 3rd Hokage's Doryuu Taiga and Doryuu Dan (episode 69) but the full dragon emerge instead of just 'part' of it. As powerful as the 'Water Dragon Blast no Jutsu'.

Note=: The flames for the Kakuryuu Hon no Jutsu is DIFFERENT to the Kakuhouou no Hane. One is a 'dragon' spirit, the other is a Tenkun no buki made from a real 'phoenix' demon.

GOD DMAN IT! I SWEAR THIS STORY IS WRITING ITSELF!!! o I did NOT plan to have it turn out this way!!!! TT I wanted the entire Orochimaru encounter to follow basically the same plotline as the manga, but NOOOOOOO this stupid story keeps on twisting my words until I followed what IT wanted. That's why it took me so bloody long to get this chapter out! OO;;

Ug... Please don't kill me because it's a cliffhanger. I really don't want to stretch this chapter any longer because it took me so bloody long just to finish it in the first place. TT Me tired..

Thank you all for your wonderful reviews. It's what keeping *me* alive and kicking. Please continue your support. I really appreciate all of them.

Questions: (I know you guys love answering these things nn)

Since Naruto is so severely injured, should he 'stay' after his own preliminary fight against Kiba? This means that he will be present to encourage Hinata and to watch Gaara's fight. Or do you guys think that he should be immediately rushed to the hospital after his fight.

Chapter 9

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Eight: Orochimaru Part 2!!!

Replies to my wonderful reviewers: **Spoilers for some of the replies...**

hieisasukelover: Yes, there will be a second fight with Orochimaru, but Naruto won't be part of it. Just read this chapter and you'll see!
nn

NO ONE important: Thanks for the suggestion. Well, this chapter sort of follow that idea but slightly differentiated! I hope you enjoy and thanks again for the review!

The TempestT: Thank you for your enthusiastic review! nn Yeah, I wanted Sasuke to be more human, more vulnerable and less like an arrogant prick which the manga portrayed him as! I guess it worked! Here's chapter 8 AND 9 at the same time so you have less time to wait! Enjoy!

GenocideHeart: Thank you for your ideas, but I don't think I'll be changing the starting line-up for the Preliminary Chuunin Exams at all. If Sakura wins ("If" because I'm still not sure yet), she'd probably be placed last to fight against Doso.

nilblaze: Thanks for your support. Uh.. as for what you can help me with.. Other than having a lot of people beta reading and some helping me come up with new jutsus, there really aren't anything

else. Oh! Unless you can draw!! OO I've got a few drawings done and I'd like to put it up on the net, but I'm not sure whether they will spoil the rest of the story or not! nn;;

SJ: Thanks for the info on the Rasengan! I really didn't know about that before! Arigato!

insanity: Thank you soooo much for the information on the Rasengan! It's mainly the lack of info that kept me from using it more often, I can feel more confident in putting it into the story now. But don't worry, Naruto probably only knows how to do a few of those levels only, not all of them. I guess there can be human-type demons, but that would bring the story a little too close to Yu Yu Hakusho, don't you think? ? I'm trying my very best to keep it Naruto-style, so that's why I'm not attempting to create a whole different world.. nn;; Ah.. about the phoenix and dragon idea, I've kept it so that there are good phoenixes just as there are bad ones, they are distinguished by their colours – for phoenixes: red is good, black is bad! For dragons, Red and black is good, blue is bad! nn;; Stupid and confusing, I know but it keeps it interesting. And yes, this particular 'Black Phoenix' is one of the special species belonging to the 'un-dead' phoenix (they use necromancy so they are considered evil). You know, I was looking for a Taijutsu style fighting that uses condensed Chakra on the palm of the hand, and guess what, you've provided me with the PERFECT OPPORTUNITY to use this technique and supplied me with a cool name!! nn Can I use it as such, pretty please!? Uh.. I'm gonna have to find a way to translate 'Angel's wrath' into Japanese, do you know what it is? (Something like 'Tenshi...?') The fire clone is also an interesting idea, I'll see where I can squeeze in that technique too! Thanks a bunch!! About the British comment, it'll be explained during the warning section.

DrazenFlames: Sorry, the curse seal stays. I can't manoeuvre it any other way without screwing the rest of the important plot points in the manga, but be satisfied that Naruto doesn't get the 5-part seal! nn As for Naruto healing, well, he doesn't heal as fast as the manga because he tries not to let the Kyuubi's Chakra slip out of his control.

The only pairing that I've decided upon is HinataXNaruto, other than that; it's open for questioning.

Chronotravel: Done! It's all in Chapter 9! I hope you continue to enjoy the story! Thanks for your support!

Panuru4u: Yes, I've heard a few people comment that Naruto seems a bit too powerful (e.g. able to push back Orochimaru) but you will see that he's gone through a hell of a lot to get to where he is today, please read Chapter 9 for further answers!

Hitomi No Ryu: Gomen! I'm not using the toad idea; Spoiler I'm using the foxes instead. nn I hope you don't mind. But trust me! It's a lot more interesting!!! The sword/whip WILL be part of one of the new OC's weaponry during the 2nd Chuunin Exam. I've already got it all planned out! Spoiler for ideas The sword can extend itself using water molecules and hardening into a flexible material and form a whip, the whip will have multiple invisible ends because of the water molecules in the air. How's that for an extension of the original idea? Do you mind? Or do you wish to have that weapon as part of your team's performance?

Daniel of Lorien: A flood of short flashbacks in Chapter 9! Hope you enjoy!

A reviewer: Thanks for the critical analysis, yeah, I know I'm lacking in the technicality department as an Author, but since I'm still slightly new at this (this is only my second fic) and still learning, I think I did pretty well. nn;; As for the phoenix, I did state that this is one of the 'Black Phoenix' race, which has connotations with the 'un-dead phoenix species' whom associates with necromancy type powers. Well, it's an AU anyway and it was too good to pass up the idea. nn;;

Lizard-chan: Thanks for telling me where 'foxed-out' comes from. I've completely forgotten about that story since I haven't read it in a while. nn And sorry for not replying in the last chapter... nn;; And thanks for the support!

Angelfromhell: I'm updating as fast as I write and for my pre-readers to edit. I know it takes a while, I'm really sorry! nn;; Some of those jutsus you sent me were very interesting, I especially liked the paralysing kunai or the killing Barrier. I'll see what I can do with them. Thanks again! nn

Fionn the Otaku: The 'Mary Sue' idea will be battled out in the next chapter. Hope you like how I managed his character!

And to EVERYONE ELSE: Thank you all SOOOO MUCH for the supportive reviews! I'll do my very best to meet each and everyone of your expectations. nn

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. uh.. LOTS OF SWEARING!! Naruto doesn't do a single thing in this chapter. nn;;; You'll mainly see some developments within Sasuke, Sakura, and some of the other characters. Sakura-fans rejoice! Sakura is a main heroin in this particular chapter.

Just a small note, I'm not British, I'm Australian. And because we learn the proper British style English, it comes through in my writing sometime. I don't use the F word very often in life and therefore it doesn't appear much in the story either. So I use the B word a lot as a substitute. Sorry. It's a subconscious move...nn;;;

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 8

After three hours of constant travelling, the members of team 7 found themselves to be only half way there towards the tower and already,

they were tired due to their previous engagements and battles.

"Sas- Sas- Sasuke-k-kun! Can... we... rest... now?" Sakura gasped with every deep breath she took.

Landing and finally stopping on a near by tree, Sasuke squatted down to take some time to rest as well. He too, could be seen breathing heavily. After all, he had been carrying the heavy burden of Naruto on his back the entire way.

Sasuke gazed around their immediate surroundings, analysing the risk factor in staying here and resting up instead of continuing on their way. Three hours of constant travelling have taken them many miles from their original location, and away from their dangerous predator. Nodding to himself while he came to a decision, Sasuke looked back at the slumping figure of his female teammate and the unconscious form of his other teammate still residing on his back. "I think... we'll be safe for the moment being..." With that said he sat down heavily on the large branch and slowly lowered his injured comrade onto it gently.

Hearing the confirmation, Sakura dropped her exhausted body completely onto her own branch and leaned heavily against the thick trunk. Closing her eyes for a moment to concentrate on slowing her heartbeat and breathing, she tried to analyse how much Chakra she had left in her. Not much left at all... Probably enough to perform one more jutsu but anymore and I'll collapse... Sakura thought forlornly. She mentally cursed herself for being weak at such an important time. Shaking her head off such depressing thoughts, she looked towards Sasuke and watched in surprise as he started removing the bandages over the still unconscious Naruto's body.

"Sas... Sasuke-kun? Wha...?"

"We need to change the bandages." Sasuke answered her inquiry, though he never stopped inspecting the wounds on Naruto's back. "All the old bandages have blood stains on them and it's starting to get dirty as well."

Staggering to her feet, Sakura took some extra effort to jump her way towards the branch that Sasuke and Naruto was currently residing on. Bending down herself, she helped Sasuke to remove the rest of the old bandages and immediately started looking through their reserve packages for more new ones, trying desperately not to look directly at the wounds itself. She frowned as she looked over the amount of bandages they have left. "Sasuke-kun... We probably only have just enough for dressing him this one time, but there won't be any left for later... And we need to keep him warm, but his shirt and jacket were shredded beyond repair." Gulping down her fear, she looked up to Sasuke's own furious and determined eyes. "What are we going to do? We can't..." Blinking back tears, Sakura took another deep breath to calm herself, but to no avail. Her voice quivered as she continued with her suspicions. "We... probably won't make it...We... won't be able to..."

"We **WILL** !" Sasuke answered resolutely. "We *have* to!"

Nodding shakily back, Sakura was feeling instantly grateful that Sasuke had returned with her to find Naruto. If she had been by herself, she probably would have just stood there and cried her heart out. She still found herself shaking in these emotionally stressing and physically taxing situations, even after the events in the Hidden Wave village. She may have improved herself physically to be better at handling them but mentally, she was still the weak little girl she's always been, hiding behind her teammates to protect her. GOD DAMN IT! STOP SHAKING!!!With the iron clad will of inner Sakura at her beckoning, outer Sakura slowly stopped her body's automatic shivering. Gaining control over her body once more, Sakura smiled gratefully at Sasuke and then started to un-wrap the new bandages.

It took the two of them several minutes to discard all the old bandages, cleaned the wound as best they could with any clean cloth they had left, disinfect it with some of their medicine, and quickly re-bandaged everything. After they finished, Sasuke decided that now would be the best and only time for them to rest, so he

would take the first watch to allow Sakura to rest first, she gratefully accepted.

After Sakura feel asleep just leaning on the tree trunk, Sasuke finally noticed the two strange foxes that stood on a branch several trees away. Their eyes avidly watched the three children with full concentration but did not come any closer nor go any father away from the group. Sasuke stared at the foxes and the foxes stared back, both unwilling to step down.

Finally deciding that having a staring contest with stupid foxes was not very productive, Sasuke decided first to lower his head and looked away. As long as they're no threat to us, then that's just fine with me. Though he did find it odd that two such foxes, one golden brown and the other chocolate brown, would be standing so far up from the ground on another large branch. They're not normal. Sasuke thought, but then reminded himself that they could very well have been native animals of the Forest of Death, and so he too returned his complete attention away from the foxes.

It was 2 hours later when the illusion of peace was completely destroyed by the return of the predator. Sasuke immediately felt the same presence of that dreaded snake man when he sensed they were being watched. It was the same sensation of danger and fear mixed in with absolute silence in the background. He instantly woke Sakura up and tried to manoeuvre Naruto onto his back again. He quickly silenced Sakura by pressing a finger to her lips when she looked like she was about to protest, and then started miming silent words out to her so she would understand. It only took one word to make her eyes instantly grow large, the word 'snake' was all Sasuke needed to say.

The two quickly but silently packed everything away as fast as they possibly could. However, during their packing, they were completely startled when they heard the two foxes (whom still stood on the same tree branch) growled in deep hatred. Their canine teethes were all visible as the foxes' jaws were dropped slightly in a

menacing manner. Slitted eyes glared hatefully at a figure beyond the location of the members of team 7. Sasuke gulped as both he and Sakura turn slowly but surely towards the direction the foxes are growling at. Sure enough, there stood their previous predator, all ready and waiting, even smirking at their predicament.

"Well now. Sasuke-kun... You shouldn't runaway from a guest, it's rather rude of you, you know?" The man smiled a cruel smile. "I have planned for us to have some fun for the rest of the day..." The smile then stretched into a wicked smirk as the man's long tongue licked his lips delicately.

"Sakura! Take Naruto and RUN!!!" Sasuke immediately placed himself in front of Sakura and Naruto, acting as a shield if the man attacked. Taking advantage of all the time they had, Sasuke quickly launched his first attack at the man, even before he finished speaking. I won't runaway anymore! I can't runaway anymore!

"Katon: Housenka no Jutsu!" (Fire type: Mythical Fire Flower no Jutsu) Sasuke discharged the many small fireballs at the enemy, but the man just zigzagged his way through, dodging all the attacks. Jumping away from his group members, Sasuke attached himself to another near-by tree using Chakra, hoping to keep the enemy away from Sakura long enough for her and Naruto to escape.

With his Sharingan activated at maximum capacity, Sasuke launched several shurikens and kunais at the enemy. All of which the enemy also dodged but not as easily as before, since Sasuke was able to read much of his movements with the Sharingan and was able to predict where the man would be in the next instance.

After dodging the shurikens, both the man and Sasuke were surprised by another kunai heading towards the man but didn't originate from Sasuke's position. Sasuke frowned deeply as he felt Sakura land above him onto one of the tree's branches.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? I TOLD TO LEAVE!!!" He screamed at her in fury.

"No! Sasuke-kun! I won't! I ran away from Naruto and he almost died! I'm not running away again!" Sakura spoke back to him with conviction even though her eyes never left her target.

The chakra-enhanced kunai that she had thrown was constantly being blown away by the wind attacks the man had performed, simply blowing huge amounts of air out of his mouth. However, being Chakra control enhanced, the kunai continued to return until the man finally decided to use another tactic. Raising his arm towards the flying kunai, he shouted: "Senei Jyashu" (Sublime Snake Hands)! Multiple snakes curved out his sleeves and wrapped around the kunai, stopping its advancement in mid air. He then released his own chakra through the snakes into the kunai to neutralise the control from within. Once the kunai was neutralised, he withdrew his snakes and the kunai simply dropped back onto the ground, forgotten. He then turned his attentions back towards his prey.

Sasuke already had another jutsu planned due to the time given by Sakura's intervention. "Gokakyuu no jutsu" (Powerful Fireball no Jutsu)! The powerful flames of the fireball swept through the forest clearing, burning anything within its paths. Once the flames were burnt out, all that was left was a burning log in the middle of the burnt field. SHIT! He used Kawarimi no jutsu!

At the exact moment when Sasuke had realised his mistakes, he already felt the presence of the man behind him, even though he was attached to the surface of tree trunk. Instantly jumping away, he managed to throw two kunais and a special shuriken at the man, who was half emerged from the tree's surface, hanging upside down in a very creepy way.

The man opened his mouth and released his long tongue and another snake from his throat because both his arms were still partly merged into the tree (1). The long tongue somehow managed to wrap itself around the two kunai handles, stopping their advancement without damaging itself, and since the kunais were not Chakra enhanced, it was easy to counteract. The snake on the other hand, stretched itself out of the man's mouth for a bit and snapped

its jaws around the incoming shuriken windmill (three blades). Thinking he had outwitted the Uchiha prodigy by stopping all three of the child's weapons, the man was surprised as he noticed the small strings attached to each these weapons held by his tongue and the snake within his throat.

He looked up just in time to watch Sasuke perform another Katon seal. "Ryuuka no Jutsu" (Dragon fire no jutsu)! The fire quickly travelled through the distance of the strings and reached the man's tongue and started burning it even before he could drop the weapons. Feeling the shock of the burn, he immediately dropped the weapons within his grasp, though not soon enough to stop the fire from reaching his face. He struggled for a bit and dragged himself out of the tree before tumbling onto the ground and splashed into a large splatter of mud.

Another kawarimi no jutsu! went through both genin's minds as they watch in horror as the man re-emerged from the mud splatter to reform his original body, this time though, with part of his face burnt. Both children noticed that the man's face was not normal at all.

To their surprise the man started to laugh. "Ha ha ha ha haa..." Louder and louder, becoming more mocking, the man slowly reached towards his burnt face and slowly ripped the face flesh off and revealed his real face underneath. Looking directly at the children at hand, he gave them a wide smirk. "My name is Orochimaru..." And with that, the now named Orochimaru reached up to his Grass head protector; he smudged away the disguised symbol to proudly show off the Sound symbol underneath.

Both genin's eyes widen at the implications. They have both heard of the legendary Sennin that had turned into an enemy. Sakura's parents even used him as a figure in stories to tell her off from doing bad things. They both realised that no matter what, they'd probably not be able to escape him.

Sakura's eyes begin to tear up as she contemplated death at the hands of this dangerous creature. I... I don't want to die... The same

thoughts ran through Sasuke's head as he gulped down his nervousness and gripped onto whatever courage was left in him with a mental iron clad hand.

"You have done very well against me, Sasuke-kun... So here is a gift for you." After that, Orochimaru quickly performed a new seal. "Kanashibari no Jutsu" (2) and the technique immediately froze the two genin's body once again.

Walking towards Sasuke slowly but surely, Orochimaru bent down lightly. His head almost resting on Sasuke's neck and he whispered: "I know you want power. More power than you currently have. Seek me out and I will give you that power... if you survive." With his final comment, Orochimaru bent down completely and bit into the side of Sasuke's neck.

Sakura watched in frozen horror when Sasuke's eyes widen into impossible sizes, and then came the screams. Released from their frozen states, Sakura immediately grabbed onto the shaking and creaming body of Sasuke as the boy toppled onto the floor. She looked up and glared hatefully at the wicked man.

"What did you *do* to him?!" She demanded though her body was shaking almost as badly as Sasuke's.

Orochimaru smirked evilly. "A gift... Sasuke-kun is an avenger. In time, he will seek me out." With that said Orochimaru turned around and slowly stomped his way towards the still unconscious form of Naruto.

Sakura screamed in fright. "LEAVE HIM ALONE!!!" But with Sasuke clinging onto her clothes, she couldn't move enough to go help Naruto. Desperate, she threw her last kunai, enhanced with both power and control with the last of her Chakra, towards the hateful man.

Orochimaru released another Senei Jyashu to take care of the kunai and returned on his way towards the disciple of his enemy rival,

completely ignoring the screams of protest by the weak girl. He reached his destination soon enough and held up his own kunai, intending to slice the delicate throat of Naruto wide open to spill large amounts of blood. Suddenly, Orochimaru was surprised by a yelp from the sidelines and winched slightly in reaction when one of the foxes bit onto his hand, forcing him to drop the kunai.

Sakura watched in morbid fascination as the other fox launched itself directly onto Orochimaru's face and scratched it with all its might. To Sakura, it almost looks like the foxes were intentionally drawing Orochimaru's attention away from Naruto, desperately protecting him from being killed. Roaring in frustration and anger, Orochimaru grabbed onto both the foxes, throwing one away and slamming the other's head onto the ground. The thrown fox landed heavily against a thick tree giving off a startled yelp of pain. After that, it took some time to catch its breath and stagger onto its feet before it stood up resolutely to fight its enemy. The other fox, having been slammed onto the hard ground head first, twitched sporadically for a time before it too recovered slowly. Sakura could only hold onto her breath and tighten her grip on the now unconscious Sasuke as she watched the furious Orochimaru flicked another kunai in his hand.

He was just about to kill Naruto due to the fact that the foxes were still too disorientated from their injuries to interfere immediately, when the most unexpected thing happened. His kunai slammed onto an invisible barrier surrounding Naruto's body. The barrier itself encompassed an area shaped like a rectangular prism all around Naruto's injured form. Shocked into silence, Orochimaru could only stand aside and watch as the barrier slowly revealed itself as a soft black mirror. Then to both the genins and Orochimaru's surprise, Naruto's body started disappearing from inside the shadow barrier (3). Soon, there nothing inside the shield at all except the bloodstains on the ground. The shield itself once finished with its teleporting abilities also slowly disappeared.

Orochimaru was pulled out his shock when he heard Sakura shouting in surprise. He looked up in anger as he watched the same

strange shadow force-field surround both Sakura and Sasuke and started their teleportation as well. Looking around, he was furious but not surprised when all signs of the two intruding foxes had disappeared as well. F==K!!!! F==K IT ALL TO HELL!!!He cursed furiously to himself as he lost all his prey in that moment of surprise.

Orochimaru then started a small tantrum in the empty clearing, burning and destroying any tree, bush, rock or creature in his way as he tried to burn out his anger. After a few minutes of unproductive mayhem, he finally settled down into his cool and calm exterior that he likes to maintain at all times. Inside his mind though, there is a whirlwind of unanswered questions and unease. This was supposed to be a SIMPLE mission! Find Uchiha, beat his teammates, and give him the seal and LEAVE!!! But nooooo! Fate is so against me today. First is that Kyuubi BRAT of Jiraiya's!!! How the HELL could that kid be *that* powerful! And the TENKUN NO BUKIS!! SHIT! IF I COULD ONLY CONTROL ONE OF THEM, I'D BE ABLE TO DESTROY THE ENTIRE KONOHA!!!He fumed silently but continued with his analysis of the bad day that he had suffered through. After the brat's fight, then I had to spend 5 GOD DAMN HOURS hunting the kids. They're pretty good at stealth and covering their tracks! AND NOW!!! NOW!! Those annoying foxes and the "Kageheki"! (4) I feel like I'm taking on the F==king WORLD today!

Taking another few minutes to calm his heartbeat and breathing, Orochimaru was not surprised to be rejoined by two of his Sound Four (5) when he had heard some sounds approaching him.

"Orochimaru-sama! What happened!?" One man hiding behind his Henge no Jutsu asked.

"Nothing!" Orochimaru huffed in irritation. It would not do to look disgraced in front of his subordinates. "Let's go! We've already accomplished what we set out to do!" With that said he turned around from the direction of the children's disappearance and jumped onto the trees to leave the Forest of Death.

Along the way, he kept on questioning himself as to what had happened that last few minutes. The Kageheki is a very rare jutsu that requires a Bloodline Limit as well as the skill for special Chakra manipulations to be able to perform it... The Nara family has the ability and family traditions, but I don't know of anyone in their line that could possibly have learnt of this technique! Hell! If I hadn't been secretly looking through the Hidden scroll of Seals all those years ago (6), I'd probably not recognise the jutsu at all... Just goes to show how very far I am to my ultimate goal.

Sakura could only blink and pinch herself in order to justify if this was still reality or if she had lost her mind. Just moments ago, she and Sasuke had been surrounded by a strange shadow barrier. As the barrier darkened into a complete black mist, Sakura had found herself sinking into the dark ground underneath her. Shutting her eyes tightly in terror and screaming her head off for a few seconds, when she had finally felt that she was on solid ground again, she opened her eyes to find herself back in the Forest of Death. Or at least, she assumed it was the same Forest of Death, only much closer to the tower then they had travelled during their previous haste. She could visually see the tower in the distance.

After coming out of her shock, she had immediately set out checking over Sasuke's injuries as well as Naruto's (whom also appeared in the same area unharmed by their last encounter with Orochimaru). Even the foxes were present, one licking its wounds on its front paws, the other guarding the still sleeping form of Naruto. Sakura confirmed that Sasuke had only suffered small wounds and started dragging him towards a fallen tree trunk. She then returned for Naruto, getting some help from the two foxes dragging him into the same shelter created by the giant tree. After that, she settled herself down to decide what she must do from now on. She opened up all of their supplies and lined them out to see what she could still do with them.

Let's see... There are still five explosion notes left... Naruto has all of his supply of kunais and shurikens, so I can use those. She sighed slightly when she remembered she had used most of hers in a frivolous manner against their first opponent and the following fights with Orochimaru. It's stupid of me to waste all of my weapons in such a short fight... shaking her head to clear it, she returned to her analysis. Not enough bandage for a second wrapping... and definitely not enough medicine... so that means that I *have* to reach the tower soon to give both Sasuke and Naruto the medical attention that they need. There's still the problem about Naruto catching a cold without any proper shirt, and I'm also worried about that weird symbol that's on Sasuke's neck...

Sakura's eyes started tearing up a bit but she rubbed them away resolutely. Now is not the time to give up. I can't give up! They're depending on me! She was surprised by the whining encouragements from both the foxes, whom have now settled themselves on both sides of Naruto, leaning over his chest lightly. Sakura gasped in slight shock. They're keeping him warm! She blinked and gave them a smile in gratitude. Okay, that means I can stop worrying about that now... but still... how am I suppose to bring them all the way to the tower by myself?! There's no way I would be able to use Kage Bunshin at a time like this. I'm already running low on Chakra and even at my peak, I probably wouldn't be able to pull it off all the way to the tower anyway.

Sighing in defeat, Sakura looked over at their forgotten Ten scroll. She had been the one carrying the scroll through out their entire journey. Naruto had instructed them to do so because it would be logical to have Sasuke as first defence and Naruto as second defence and that would result in no intruders getting to Sakura. She had at first argued the point, stating that Naruto should hold onto it since he was the strongest, but then again, logically, Naruto would also be the first to fight if they were against a strong enemy, so eventually she gave in. All this for a stupid scroll, huh? No, Orochimaru wasn't after our scroll at all... He wants something else. Looking over at the dark haired boy in sadness. He wants

Sasuke-kun...her sad eyes shifting into determined eyes. But he won't get Sasuke-kun! I'll make sure of that!

Finally deciding that it would be best to set up some traps in the surrounding area and stay for the night to gather her strength, Sakura set off to do just that. After fixing up three intricate traps around their temporary haven, she turned towards the foxes. "Now I know you guys want to protect Naruto for some odd reason, so I have a proposition for you." Mentally berating to herself that she was talking to animals, whom couldn't understand human speech; she was slightly unnerved by the undivided attention of both foxes gazing directly at her, as if waiting for her response. "Well, how about you two take turns keeping watch over the night so that I may have some sleep. This is so that I can reserve enough energy to travel tomorrow and get these two to the tower immediately. And if either Sasuke or Naruto's started moving about during the night, wake me up immediately, okay?" Sakura's eyes bulged as she watched both foxes nodding to her in understanding. Okay... either I'm losing my mind or these foxes can actually understand me. Trusting them for now, Sakura settled herself into a comfortable position and quickly fell into a light sleep due to her day's exhaustion.

High above them, on one of the trees, sat a man (7) hidden in shadows. He sat very still, and stayed completely silent, as he watched over the children through out the night, before he vanished into thin air early the next day.

The next day was shining bright and early when Sakura suddenly woke to the sounds of the two foxes snarling near by as a sign of danger. She immediately jolted up into a fighting stance as she quickly looked around for any enemy. All she saw as a small squirrel running away from the threatening foxes and then she sighed. "Damn you two!" She glared at the two foxes for scaring her like that. "It was just a stupid squirrel; you didn't have to go that far." But she immediately felt suspicious when the foxes continued to snarl in a threatening manner, not turning their gaze from the bushes directly

up ahead. There's something wrong! There must be if these foxes are ignoring me.

Also looking up at the location the foxes were glaring at, she shouted to the hidden enemy. "Come out! I know you're there!" Three figures emerged out of said bush following her call; they belonged to the Sound team. Sakura gulped in slight nervousness but with determination and anger in her eyes. It's the sound again! Are they still after Sasuke-kun?! Glancing back at the dark haired boy for a moment, she glared at them full force. "Why are you here? And what have Orochimaru done to Sasuke-kun?"

The three stood stiffly at her pronouncement and gazed at each other in slight confusion. "We were simply ordered to kill Sasuke. We know not what Orochimaru-sama has planned, but we will follow our orders." And with that said, all three of the Sound Nins fell into battle position just as Sakura drew out a kunai for self-defence.

The strange boy with a bandaged head and his strange armband walked forward slowly, he reached down onto the ground, grabbed hold of the fake grass and pulled it off to reveal one of Sakura's traps. "Heh.. Pretty obvious, don't you think? Who do you take us for?" He and his other two members immediately jumped upwards to avoid the obvious hole in the ground. Sakura smirked as she reached back to cut one of the stringed traps she had prepared earlier.

Instantly, a huge tree boulder swung down from being hidden in the trees above directly at the Sound Nins. Another member of the team, this one with dark brown hair and holes in his palm retaliated against the attack. Aiming his open palm at the giant falling tree trunk, he called out: "Zankuuha!!" (Air Slicing Blast)

Immediately, the falling tree was blasted into many pieces due to the intense air pressure released from the blast attack. However, Sakura only smirked in response to their actions. Suddenly, a huge 'BOOM' resounded through out the clearing as the explosion note she had

attached to the tree earlier activated, she had made it so that it'll react if the tree has been destroyed or tampered with.

The three sound Nins tried desperately to avoid the debris of the tree as well as the resulting fire blast of the explosion note, each of them landing some distances away in different directions. While they tried to get their balance back into their body, Sakura pressed her advantage in surprise attack. She instantly launched herself towards the only female ninja in the group. That bandaged guy could shatter Kabuto-san's glasses without actually touching him, which means that close-hand combat is out of the question for him. And that other guy, after seeing him blast the tree away with something, it'd be wise to not attack him head on as well... So that leaves the girl.

Surprised and still slightly shaky from the previous explosion, the female Sound Nin was completely caught off guard as Sakura suddenly dropped down low directly in front of her and swiped her off her feet with a swing of her legs in a wide arc. Down on the floor on her back, the enemy could only roll away quickly to avoid the kunai that Sakura wielded, trying to stab her. Rolling to her side and rising up finally, the long black haired girl was still too slow in reacting to Sakura's rapid approach. Quickly throwing some metal needles, the girl was surprised once again at Sakura's speed in dodging it (Sakura had placed extra Chakra on her feet for a boost of speed). Sakura suddenly appeared at the girl's side instead and gave her a strong punch on her face. Since the punch had also been slightly enhanced with Chakra, the blow was powerful enough to knock the enemy off her feet complete, thrown by the force to land several metres away and laid there panting. "Kin!" one of the boys shouted in anger.

One down slightly, two to go! Sakura tallied mentally as she quickly performed a familiar seal to withstand the onslaught of the bandaged boy currently running rapidly towards her. Soon, he had reached her location. Swinging his arm's strange device at Sakura, who blocked the attack at the last minute. He called forth his special attack: "Kyoumeisen!" (8) The resulting sound waves travelled into Sakura's

ears, but to the bandaged boy's complete shock, Sakura's body puffed out of existence and all that's left was a ruined block of wood. KAWARIMI??? He glared hatefully at the block of wood as he realised Sakura had just completed the Kawarimi before his attack. Glancing around, he found his adversary running quickly towards Zaku, his last member who hadn't fought the girl yet.

Zaku had been planning on getting to Sasuke while their female teammate was busy with Kin, but with Kin down and Doso out-maneuvred, he was surprised at the speed that Sakura was running at. Sakura knew it had been a mistake to come out of her protective station over her two charges to fight the enemy but now, she placed all the guilt aside to concentrate on the battle at hand. I can't make any mistakes! Naruto and Sasuke's lives depend on me! I've got to fight three different people... This is gonna be hard!

Sakura threw a shuriken at the dark haired boy, whom raised his palm up ready to blast away the offending weapon. But to his surprise, the Chakra enhanced shuriken swung by him completely; he turned just in time to see the shuriken cut another string within the temporary shelter of team 7 members. SHIT! ANOTHER TRAP???!! Indeed the cut string activated a second set of traps that Sakura had planned the day before.

Almost immediately, multiple kunais were shot off from underground directly in front of Zaku. The boy raised his hands up as fast as he could to blast them away, but wasn't quick enough to stop a few from stabbing right into his arms and hands. He shouted out in pain and anger, turned to glare hatefully at the pink haired girl before charging towards her in a fit of rage. Grabbing onto his own kunais, he threw them all towards Sakura, only to watch her perform another kawarimi to avoid the weapons.

Sakura somersaulted over the Sound team to avoid detection and landed lightly in front of her injured teammates in a protective stance. She watched in unease as the three Sound Nins slowly stood back up and faced her all at once. SHIT! If they attack as a group I'm doomed!

As if fate was against her today, all three sound Nins started running towards her at high speed. God! I have no choice! I have to use that technique!! Lifting both her hands up to start a seal, she was completely surprised by the enthusiastic yell of "KONOHA SENPUU!!" (Leaf Spinning Wind!!)

With one giant swipe with his feet, Rock Lee, the self-proclaimed 'Beautiful Green Beast of the Hidden Leaf' was able to knock away all three of the Sound Nins in one attack. Sakura gaped at the show of power and skill. "I am Rock Lee. And anyone who dares hurt the beautiful Sakura-san, is an enemy of mine." The green clad boy proclaimed.

Sakura only blinked in response. "Le... Lee-san! Wh.. Why? ..." But she was interrupted by his explanation.

"I will always appear when you are in trouble, Sakura-san." He said simply.

Sakura blinked several times, smiled slightly at him but thought sarcastically to herself. If that's so, then where were *you* when I needed help yesterday... But she didn't speak out her mind and concentrated on helping Lee as much as possible in this fight. "Thanks... Let's just beat them together..." She said as she stood up confidently and held two kunais in her hands in preparation.

Doso grunted when he instantly jumped towards Lee in a battle stance. Lee, on the other hand, slammed his right hand underground and pulled out a huge tree root to block the Sound Nin's approach. Though surprised at the move, the sound Nin did not react in any other way except placing his hand on the tree root's surface and activated his sound attack again. This time, Lee had managed to jump a fair distance away to avoid the attack, but his tree root was soon disintegrated by the sound's attack.

"Lee-san! Don't get close to that boy! He uses some kind of Sound vibration to shatter the matter in any inanimate object, and who knows what will happen if he directed that attack at a human ear!"

Sakura shouted back her advice as she threw a Charka enhanced kunai at her opponent. Unknowingly, the boy raised his armband to fend off the power enhanced kunai, only to get pushed off by the full force of the kunai that made a rather large crack on his sound manipulation device. Not only that, but the Sound Nin himself had been thrown off his feet and pushed several metres back by the formidable power behind the kunai. "YOU BITCH!!" He yelled in rage.

Lee turned around and gave Sakura a very surprised look, as if he didn't expect her to be that strong to begin with. She gave him a self-assured smirk, indicating that she was not as weak as he had first thought. Lee gave her a short nod before launching himself at the enemy. Un-wrapping the bandages on his arms as he went, Lee thought it was high time to begin the Initial Lotus.

Leaning down low with his body, Lee suddenly struck up with his feet at Doso's vulnerable chin. With that one powerful kick, he had pushed Doso high up into the air, and then Lee followed him with a Leaf Shadow Dance, attaching his body to the shadow of the still flailing Doso. Twirling and wrapping his bandages around Doso's unmoving body, Lee tightly sealed up his movement and began spinning in midair. The spin of the Initial Lotus took a lot of Lee's energy and control but he completed it in just a few seconds, increasing the pace of the spin even as he was about to hit the hard ground. Lee released his grip on Doso's body just in time to get out of the way from the impact zone. However, to both Lee and Sakura's shock, Zaku had somehow managed to neutralise the attack by using his air pressure techniques to manipulate the ground under Doso, softening it enough to take Lee's attack.

"Man, what a terrifying attack." Doso said as he slowly struggled out of the hole he had landed so harshly on. Glancing at the other two Sound members, whom nodded back in agreement, all three of them suddenly rushed towards both Lee and Sakura.

Kin went after Sakura with a furious scowl on her face while Doso concentrated on Lee, leaving Zaku to head towards the two still

unconscious boys or as back up for the other two. Lee, after having just performed the Initial Lotus was still in a weakened state when Doso rammed into him and activated his sound attack at the same time. "Kyoumeisen!" Immediately, Lee screamed in agony as he felt the large amounts of sound waves invade his ear, his vision wobbled in front of his eyes and he vaguely heard Sakura's cry of his name before he collapsed onto the floor, mentally berating himself for getting into this type of situation, and in front of the person he liked too.

Sakura was slightly distracted when she watched how easily Lee-san had fallen to the Sound's attack. "Lee-san!!!" She shouted, but that small amount of distraction gave Kin the chance to strike her from the back. Sakura fell forward and landed on the ground heavily. Sakura gasped in pain as she felt Kin literally stepped onto her back, grabbing onto her hair and pulled it back up as far as she could. "This is for *daring* to punch *me* in the face, you whore!" Kin snarled in anger while Sakura screamed in pain. Sakura watched through teary eyes as Zaku evenly strolled towards the unconscious forms of Sasuke and Naruto. Naruto-kun! Sasuke-kun! I.. I.. I've failed! She thought in horror.

However, to of their surprise surprise, the two foxes whom have guarded Naruto with their lives before had decided that this was the most appropriate time to attack. They jumped from Zaku's blind spots to attack him on each side, one biting him on his leg, the other jumping onto his face to scratch it. Zaku shouted in shock and anger at being bitten and scratched by sharp fox claws at the same time. He struggled to rid himself of the two beasts before Doso came to help, grabbing onto the fox on Zaku's feet, pulling it off and slamming his metallic arm band onto the small creature. With one fox gone, Zaku was able to fend off the other one and blew it across the ground until it slammed against a tree with his Zankuuha. "Stupid FOXES!" He yelled with a furious look in his eyes.

Sakura watched on in blind admiration as both foxes struggled onto their feets, whimpered slightly in pain before snarling back at their

enemies again. What was I thinking?! Giving Up?! Giving up while those two fought with all their might!? I'm such a F==king coward! Here I am, the only one capable of saving both Saskue-kun and Naruto-kun, and I'm F==king USELESS!!! I won't give up! I can't give up!! For once, outer Sakura completely agreed with inner Sakura, believing that they were the only ones capable of doing something, and therefore must find a way to survive, no matter what the costs.

Sakura then noticed that Kin had been slightly distracted by the two foxes' surprise attack on Zaku and took her chance. With a kunai still in her hand, she quickly reached up and sliced off most of her hair that Kin was holding on to. Then, Sakura pushed off the surprised Kin, rolled to her side and stood up in a battle stance again. Once up, she started performing new seals. I can probably only use this technique once with the amount of Chakra I have now. Forgive me, Naruto. I can't think of a better time to use this technique you've taught me. I would do anything to protect both of you. Even if it cost me my life.

"Gen Bunshin no Jutsu!" (Illusionary Shadow Replication) (9) Sakura shouted as three puffs of smoke appeared beside her to reveal three Sakura replicas. "Let's go!" The real Sakura said as she suddenly puffed out of existence while the other three charged forward towards their enemies.

Kin was very irritated at being beaten and humiliated by the pink haired girl so many times today, that she angrily launched several metal needles at the Sakura that was running towards her. To her surprise, the needles passed straight *through* the Sakura replica. Is it a just a Bunshin? Taken aback at the revelation, Kin did not notice until too late that the same Sakura replica had suddenly disappeared and reappeared right in front of her and slammed her fist into Kin's face for a second time that day. Kin was thrown back by the Chakra enhanced punch before slamming into a tree and losing consciousness there and then. After that, the Sakura bunshin that she had been fighting against puffed out of existence.

"Kin!" Doso shouted in surprise but was still blocking a kunai that the supposed Sakura's replica threw towards him.

Beside him, Zaku asked back in irritation: "What the hell is with these... *things* ? Are they Kage bunshins or just bunshins? Why is it each time I hit them nothing happens, and yet when there is an opening they charge forward and gain a real hit?!"

Doso avoided all the shurikens and kunais being thrown at him as well as sending some of his sound waves towards the inanimate replicas. "I think..." He dodged another kick but was too slow to react before the replica jumped away again. "That she combined Genjutsu with Bunshin no Jutsu! She uses the Bunshins to fight and distract us while waiting for an opening to attack us using the real her. However, she's probably using an invisibility technique on herself right now which is why we can't sense her at all!" He explained as calmly as he could while dodging attacks.

"Shit! How do we beat that?!" Zaku shouted back as he struggled with his own Bunshin/Genjutsu thing while trying to keep his ground.

"Zaku! I'll manoeuvre them into the same area, and then give it your biggest Zankuuha to blast them away; the real one can't be far away from her replicas!" Doso supplied a solution, and the two remaining sound Nins did just that.

Being forced to avoid the Kyoumeisen Sound attack from Doso, the Sakura bunshins had no choice but to retreat, and when Zaku found his chance, he immediately launched into his own attack.

"Zankuuha! (Air slicing Blast) Maximum Force!!" The resulting blast completed blasted away half of the clearing. Soon, what was revealed was a very beaten Sakura lying on the floor, unmoving.

"Heh! Damn Bitch, she deserved everything she got." Zaku sneered at the girl cruelly.

"Let's just finish her off and then kill both Sasuke and that other one too." Doso replied with an almost tired note to his voice. "Let's

complete our mission."

Upon taking two steps towards the unmoving girl, the two foxes from before appeared in front of her to snarl and snap angrily at the Sound nins in pure hatred.

"Oh no, not them again, I'm about fed up with all this SHIT. Can't I just kill them all in one big swoop?!" Zaku complained in a whining, childish voice. Doso nodded and they were about to reach for their weapons when three different figures were suddenly dragged out from a side bush to stand resolutely in front of them. Looking at the group's forehead protector, Doso and Zaku realised it was another group from the Hidden Leaf village. "Damn! What is with all these weirdos popping up everywhere?!" He asked angrily.

It was then that Sakura struggled into the conscious realm; she slowly looked up to see the back of a purple shirt. Purple? She was brought out of her mental musings by a familiar voice, the voice of Yamanaka Ino. "Oi! Sakura! I told you before! I won't lose to you." The blond girl said resolutely.

"Ino?" Sakura asked in a very confused and quiet voice.

===== **Same scene, different point of view!**

Unbeknownst to the members of Team 7, Team 8 has been hiding within the bushes of the clearing of the battle for some time now. It all started with running away from the Hyuga prodigy, Hyuga Neji. Ino and Shikamaru had been arguing over which team they should attack to grab the new scroll they needed and Chouji suddenly announced to them that both Sasuke and Naruto are knocked out while Sakura is the only one fighting.

Ino watched in horror and shock as Sakura outwitted all three of the Sound nins again and again, slicing up her own hair in an attempt to get away without showing any emotion on her face other than determination. She watched silently as her childhood friend was pushed beyond her limit and she realised. Sakura... You've become

so strong. It was like a splash of cold water onto Ino's face. She had never ever imagined that Sakura could have improved so much. Technique after technique, kunai after kunai, Sakura landed blow after blow on the Sound Nins and even managed to knock out the female ninja without even getting a scratch on herself. It was like watching your worst nightmare and the most admirable dream at the same time. The only thoughts running through her mind at that moment were visions of their pasts. She had always enjoyed being the 'big sister' of Sakura, she had always enjoyed being protective and act as if she was superior and a know it all. But in the end, there was no difference at all.. What have I been doing all this time??? She thought. Sakura must have trained her butt off to get where she is now! And me... What about ME!??? What have I BEEN DOING all this time???... The only answer Ino could come up with was.. nothing.. I've been doing nothing...

It was Shikamaru's nudging her from her side that pulled Ino out of her mental shock. In front of them now, stood two arrogant though slightly miffed Sound nins, and an unmoving Sakura on the floor. Ino didn't even think about her action as her body automatically went into 'protective' mode over her childhood friend. Before she could even blink, she found herself was standing resolutely over Sakura's body and glaring at the Sound Nins with all her might. It seems nothing's ever changed about me... I'm still so over-bearing when it comes to Sakura in pain... Well, I may not be as strong as Sakura but I won't stand by to watch her and Sasuke-kun get hurt or worse right in front of my eyes without helping.

This time, it was Chouji's fearful voice that brought her out of her musings. "WHAT ARE YOU GUYS THINKING?! THESE GUYS ARE DANGEROUS!! WE'LL BE KILLED!!!" It was then that Ino noticed that she wasn't alone; she had her teammates, Shikamaru and Chouji on either side of her. I'm not alone... so I can do this..

Shikamaru answered back self-depreciatingly: "It's troublesome, I know. But we have no choice. If Ino is coming out, then we men can't runaway." He said simply.

Ino gave Shikamaru a small indulgent smile and thought to herself. Thank you Shika, you have no idea what that means... To know that I'm not alone when facing such adversaries. She turned her attentions back at the Sound Nins and replied back. "Sorry to get you guys involved, but we're a team. And we always stand together!

"Heh. You can leave if you're scared, Fat ass!" Zaku insulted, standing arrogantly in front of the new Leaf team.

Chouji's eyebrow twitched. "What did you say..." He asked in a small voice.

Zaku smirked at him haughtily. "I said! If you want, you can runaway like the little shit you are, you FAT ASS!"

There was a short silence that followed before Chouji bellowed in rage. "I'M NOT FAT! I'M JUTS BIG BONED!!!"

Shikamaru hid a small smirk on his face. Damn this is troublesome. But the guy just said the taboo word, not once, but twice! The idiot! He's gonna get it now!"Alright. Let's Go!"

Instantly, Chouji performed a seal. "Baika no jutsu!" (Multisize no Jutsu) Chouji's body suddenly bloated up and all his limbs and head disappeared into his round body. "Meat Tank!" He shouted from within as his huge, round body started spinning forward. Zaku tried to counter with his Zankuuha, but found that the spinning technique was pushing his air pressure away from his intended direction. Suddenly, Chouji jumped up into the sky and was aiming to smash down onto Zaku, who avoided it just in time.

Doso tried to run towards Zaku but found that he couldn't move suddenly. Glancing at the other team's members, he immediately noticed that the boy with a high ponytail had his shadow connected with his own. "What the hell is this jutsu?" He demanded as the boy made a very stupid display by putting his hands on his head. What irritated Doso most was that his own body followed the boy's moves, so he took, looked ridiculous doing the same displays.

"Heh. I guess you've never heard of Konoha's famous Kagemane no Jutsu, eh?" (Shadow Copy no Jutsu) Shikamaru asked in a self-assured way. Looking towards Ino, he said: "Ino, it's your turn, since that girl is already knocked out, she'll be easy to control, use her as bait."

Ino nodded in comprehension: "Right!" She then performed her own seals. "Ninpou: Shintenshin no Jutsu!" (Ninjutsu: Mind body switch) Immediately, Ino's body slumped and was caught cautiously by Shikamaru. On the other side of the field, Kin's body slowly stood up and raised a kunai to her neck. "HEY! It's over now you guys! I have full control over this girl's body and if you don't want her to die, drop your scroll and leave, I'll release her body once I'm convinced you guys are far away!" However, looking at the strange smirks on body Doso and Zaku's faces, Ino (within Kin) shifted nervously. "You hear me!? Drop your scroll and leave!"

"INO! DON'T!!!" Ino vaguely heard Sakura's warning but it was already too late. To her surprise, Zaku suddenly raised his open palm towards her and released another Zankuuha. Ino (within Kin's body) slammed up against the same tree that Kin had hit before and slumped down. She struggled to look up. "You! You would hurt your own!?" She asked in shock and pain.

"Don't get us wrong, we don't care about the scrolls at all, we were just ordered to kill Sasuke. The three of us are just allies for the time being. We hold no loyalty to each other." Doso explained simply.

Knowing that she was beat, Ino quickly returned to her body and struggled to stand on her own while still being supported by Shikamaru. At the same time, Chouji stumbled towards them since he had used up his Chakra for the previous jutsu he had used. Shikamaru too, was feeling very tensed now that his own Jutsu would not hold any longer. As if mocked by fate, the Kagemane no jutsu chose that moment to return the shadow bind to Shikamaru, releasing Doso in the process.

Doso stretched his arm a bit before glaring at the three Genins in front of them. "Now.. where was I? Oh yeas, killing time..."

"Heh... What a pathetic sight..." An unrecognisable voice rang through out the clearing and all heads swivelled towards the voice. It belonged to one Hyuga Neji, and beside him, stood his female teammate. "You sound Nins think you're so tough, beating up on second-rate Leaf Nins, do you?"

"Damn it! Another cockroach comes out of hiding!" Zaku complained irritably.

"Don't be mistaken." Looking towards the unconscious Lee, Neji continued. "He is one of ours and you're gonna pay for hurting one of ours!" Neji scorned as he activated his Byakugan. The veins around his eyes popped up with the flow of Chakra. To the sound nins, it almost looked as if Neji's eyes were a glowing white flame of power and anger. They shuddered slightly.

"Heh. If you're so bothered, why not come down here and fight us like a man?!" Zaku mocked.

Neji released his Byakugan. "It seems that won't be necessary anymore."

Before they could interpret what he meant, another voice rang out through the clearing, however, this time; the voice was cold and harsh. "Sakura... Who did that to you?" All heads swivelled around to face the now conscious Uchiha Sasuke. However, to all those who knew him, this Sasuke didn't seem normal at all. He had strange markings all over his body, stretching from his left arm, over his neck and face. His eyes too, glowed an unholy red with the incomplete Sharingan shining proudly.

Zaku seeing that his real foe is finally up, he proclaimed arrogantly: "We did it." He would regret those words for the rest of his life.

"Sasuke-kun?" Sakura tried to struggle onto her feet, but they refused to budge. "Wha.." She tried to ask but was interrupted by Sasuke.

"Don't worry. I'm fine.. In fact, I feel great." Sasuke answered blandly with a nasal voice.

"But Sasuke-kun!" Sakura finally found some strength to rebuff back. "That mark? That power?! It's unnatural, it's not.." Once again, she was interrupted in her tirade.

"I am an avenger, Sakura. Not matter how unnatural or evil the power may be; I will do anything and everything to get my hands on it. I will take the devils fruit if it was offered to me." Sasuke explained as he started walking slowly towards Zaku with a face masked by fanatical rage. "Now... Let's begin..."

Seeing that a real fight was going to begin, Shikamaru quickly dragged Ino out of the way and shouted for Chouji to do the same for Lee. They made it just in time to avoid the onslaught brought on by Sasuke's new Chakra. The burst of unnatural Chakra flowed and circled around Sasuke like living thing, feeding off his anger and hate like a serpent, ready to do its master's bidding. Shikamaru shuddered at the unholy sight. What is that Chakra? Normal Chakra is blue... so why is Sasuke's purple?!

Doso looked on in shock at the enormity of Sasuke's power. Zaku, however, had no qualms with battling it out here and now. Dosu noticed too late what Zaku's intentions were and shouted out a warning to him. "Zaku! NO! He's too powerful!"

"Ultimate Zankuuhah!!" Zaku released his most powerful attack and watched in satisfaction as the rest of the clearing was destroyed. However, he suddenly felt a presence behind him and he tried to turn around, both his arms were caught in a deadlock within the strong grips of the not deceased Uchiha Sasuke. Behind the insane boy, Zaku could see that both Sakura and the other blond boy were unharmed by his attack. Zaku finally came out of his shock when he

felt that his arms were being bent at a very unnatural angle, causing him to scream in pain.

"Heh heh.. You're proud of these arms, aren't you?" And without a moment of doubt, Sasuke snapped the bones on Zaku's arms promptly. The resulting scream escaping from Zaku vibrated through out the entire clearing and caused many of the witnesses there to shudder in fear.

"Zaku!" Doso shouted with concern in his voice as he watched from the sidelines how easily this Uchiha Sasuke had defeated his team member. He stood completely still and shivered with nervousness as Sasuke turned around to face him. "Now it's your turn."

Watching wide eyed at Sasuke, who took small, self-assured steps towards his final enemy. Everyone was shocked as Sakura somehow managed to find enough strength to stand up, run towards Sasuke and halt his movements by grabbing onto him bodily and not let go. "STOP!! Sasuke-kun, PLEASE STOP!!" She pleaded with tears running down her face of which she ignored. "STOP THIS!!!" The resulting silence that followed was so still that everyone was able to hear the slight movement of Naruto's head and looked towards him, wondering if he would awaken now (10), but to no avail.

Finally, the dark markings all over Sasuke's body started disappearing. And once they were all gone, he collapsed onto the ground, exhausted. "Sasuke-kun!?" Sakura's concerned voice shattered the silence that hung in the air.

"You're strong." Doso admitted as he realised he had just been saved from certain death. "We cannot defeat at this time. So here is a gift to you." Doso placed his team's Di scroll delicately on the ground. "In payment of letting us go on our way... For now, we have something that we must make certain of and cannot die here. If we are to meet again during this exam, then we will neither run nor hide from you. Until then, let us go." Doso shifted the still whimpering

Zaku onto his shoulder and shifted his grip on the unconscious Kin, half dragging, half carrying them away.

"Wait!" Sakura demanded. "What was that mark that Orochimaru gave to Sasuke-kun? And why?!"

Doso turned away and started to leave but replied back anyway. "I don't know, we were simply told to kill that Uchiha..." And then, he disappeared into the surrounding bush land with his team members.

Soon, Ino's team all came out of their hiding places and started looking over the injuries of those that are present. Sakura needed a few plasters on her face and body. Sasuke wasn't hurt, just exhausted. Lee was okay, with only minor injuries that would heal with some ointment. But when the question came to Naruto, Sakura literary broke down into tears.

"WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO HIS BACK?!" Ino yelled in horror as she watched Shikamaru and Sasuke slowly tear away the old bandages to reveal the gruesome sight of Naruto's injured back. Chouji was currently gagging from the smell of dried blood and didn't feel so good after eating all of his chips that day. Neji narrowed his eyes as he watched the minute amounts of Chakra running everywhere all over Naruto's back, doing as much as possible to heal it bit by bit. Tenten and Lee were horrified at the sight but kept to themselves mostly. Sasuke just looked away in shame, remembering that he wasn't even there to help. Sakura continued to cry, to pour out all of her emotional turmoils of the previous day, to be rid of all her pains in that one time purging. And Shikamaru, was for once, silent as he gazed sadly at the injured boy's back.

Eventually, the different teams pulled out of their shock and gathered most of their bandages supplies for Sakura and Sasuke to use, trying to help the heavily injured team. Chouji even dedicated his scarf to them to keep Naruto warm if the need arise. However, when Neji suddenly stated that someone was heading their way from a different direction from where the Sound Nins disappeared to,

everyone tensed in anticipation and fear. Sakura especially, shuddered with fright. Oh Please GOD! Don't let it be Orochimaru!

It turned out to be none other than Kabuto, whom seemed to have lost his team members on the way after his fight with another team. He offered to help them since he had had some experience with medical ninja techniques and told them all that Naruto was already healing on his own, though slowly, so they didn't have to do anything.

After that, the teams slowly scattered in their own directions. Lee, Tenten and Neji left on their own accord, but not without Lee vowing to become stronger and defeat Sasuke in their next fight. After that, Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji left too, but Ino just had to have her two cents: "Remember Sakura! I won't lose to you!!!"

Soon, all that as left was the original team 7 members, the two foxes (whom refused to leave Naruto's side) and Kabuto. Kabuto then offered to come with them towards the tower, since both teams have their own two scrolls needed to pass the exam and more importantly, it was high time to bring Naruto to the actual medic Nins in the tower as well as warn the rest of Konoha about Orochimaru's appearance.

(1) This is following the manga, not the anime version. In the manga, the snake with the Kusanagi sword is *different* to Orochimaru's tongue; I'm using that snake. In the anime version, I think Orochimaru turns his tongue into a snake using that 'Senei Jyashu' technique. Well, even if it's not possible, this is an AU and I'm sticking with it.

(2) No idea what the English translation is. I found it under the jutsu list in Narutofan. Um.. this was their explanation: "*A Ninjutsu technique where the ninja stares down their opponent, causing them to become completely frozen in their tracks. Perfect for escaping a dire situation, or for stalling a target in an assassination.*" So yeah, no idea if it's the same technique Orochimaru used before or something else. nn

(3) This is an original jutsu that will be explained later. It belongs to one of my OCs.

(4) The Japanese name for the jutsu from above in (4). It basically translates to "Shadow" (Kage) "Barrier" (Heki).

(5) Um. I'm assuming they are part of the Sound Four. Not exactly sure. nn;;;

(6) This was before the Kyuubi attack against Konoha, so Orochimaru doesn't know about the Kyuubi seal created by the Fourth Hokage.

(7) My OC finally makes a short appearance! Don't worry, he's an ally of Naruto's!

(8) I don't know the translation for this technique!!! Anyone, HELP ME!!! TT

(9) Kinda similar to the Genjutsu/Bunshin no jutsu used by Sakura in the story Time and Time Again . I really liked that story. nn A sincere apology to the Author of that story, I didn't mean to copy it and this version is slightly different. Slightly being the important term... ;; This technique was taught by Naruto to Sakura only, so Sasuke and Kakashi doesn't know it at all. nn It's originally an Air technique so not many people knows about it either.

(10) I think that was when he was arguing with Kyuubi! nn So yeah, he got a little to emotional and actually *moved* his head slightly. nn;;

Yup... This is undoubtedly the LONGEST chapter yet.. xx;; I just keep on writing longer and longer chapters.

If you haven't noticed, there is a second chapter after this, mainly about Naruto, and it follows almost the exact timeline. Hope you guys enjoy and send me my well-deserved reviews. nn;;

Oh well, hope you guys liked it. Me tired, me gonna go to sleep now.
Bye! Zzz...

Chapter 10

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Nine: The Naruto within!

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. LOTS OF SWEARING!! **DEEP ANGST!!! Mentions of suicide! DARK!!!**

At first, all I wanted was a small section about Naruto's vision. But, like always, this story fought against me with tooth and nail until it got its way... So here it is, a whole chapter dedicated to Naruto solely for the purpose of exploring his personality, character and history. A lot of things will be making sense now when you all finish this chapter. Um.. there will be A LOT of flashback scenes here, I hope none of you mind. Oh another thing, the plot in this chapter follows the EXACT timeline as Chapter 8 previously, so they are happening at the same time!

This chapter has got NOTHING to do with Bloodlines . They are completely different. I apologise in advance to SOC Puppet if you think that this is copying your story – the whole exploring Naruto's thoughts when he's unconscious after fighting Orochimaru... thing... In this story, Naruto is NOT going to meet his long dead father... well... not in the same way... ;; And another thing, the whole missing Aunt idea has nothing to do with Bloodlines either!! I know it looks so suspicious but trust me, my OCs are very different to any other Naruto character that I have met so far! Well, just read and see!

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 9

For three days and three nights, Naruto had remained unconscious. To the outside world, he was anything but active. However, within his psyche, his mind wanders in a never-ending circle of confusion, anger, determination and resolution; all of which none of the others could ever fathom.

===== **Inside Naruto's Subconscious Mind!!**

Two very different voices could be heard in the deep, black darkness that befalls one's own mind.

"That was pathetic! Kit (1)! What the hell are you thinking!?" A loud and demonic voice yelled into the darkness in annoyance.

"Doing what I could against one of the three Legendary *Sennins* !" The other - a softer, human voice - also aggravated, rebuffed back.

"Bah! That's just an excuse and you know it! You could have taken him on and beaten him into a bloody pulp if you wanted!" The first voice insists.

"And how do you suppose I do that with my *limited* amount of Chakra!?" The second replied back in sarcasm.

"USE MINE OF COURSE! Together we could have beaten that slimy snake easily!"

"You know I can't use too much of your Chakra. It's written in our pact or have you forgotten? Kyuubi!"

"Of course I haven't! The pact entails that you have full access to 10% of my overall power supply but the rest of it is outside of your control. However, you are **STILL** a fool to not use all the resources at your disposal! Stop finding excuses! You're just afraid of my power after that incident three years ago!"

"You F==king took over my MIND, Kyuubi! You killed all those..."

"I DID NOT!!! **YOU** DID!!! Your emotions are tied to my own. My essence - my soul may be sealed *inside* of you, and my original body destroyed, but my *emotions* are directly linked to yours. You've always known about the rage that lurks in the darkness of your heart. And you know that I can feel **EVERYTHING** that you are feeling! Stop lying to yourself and face the truth! You're afraid! You're **HESITANT** over the use of my power, you always have been!"

"JUST SHUT THE F==K UP!"

"Don't you *dare* turn away from me, Kittling! You could have been **KILLED** back there, and all because you're too afraid and too God Damn proud to ask me for help! If I hadn't lent you some of my powers at that critical point in battle, you really would have been snake food! And where would that leave **ME!!!??**"

"Just shut up, Kyuubi! I know what I was doing!!! I don't need *YOU* of all creatures to *mother-hen* me to death!"

"**OF ALL OF HELL'S FLAMES!** (2) Talking sense to you is like talking to a brick wall!!... **FINE!** I'm warning you now, Kittling! If... and I mean *IF* you face that opponent again and can't hold your ground against him... I **WILL** do whatever I have to... to keep **us** alive!"

"...."

"Think over it, Kittling! ... Well, it seems like we've run out of time for our little chitchat! You seem to have subconsciously activated your other gift without knowing it..."

"WHAT!? Oh noooooo, not another vision?! Kyuubi! Hey! Kyuubi!"

"We'll talk next time, Kittling. Right now, I've got to start the healing process...AND DON'T YOU LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT! I told you I'd do anything to keep you safe and I MEAN IT! This includes healing your sorry ass even if you don't want my help!"

"... But can't you stay..."

A sigh is heard. "You know I can't enter your dreamscape, especially during one of your episodes... So I'm gonna have to leave you. Until then, STAY ALIVE AND SANE!!!" And with that, the voice disappears.

Naruto could no longer feel the presence of his other. Though not admitting it, he too, also felt slightly ashamed at his performance and slightly afraid of what could come now. He was never able to perfect his visionary skills; the visions come in all sorts of forms and at the weirdest of times through out his life. Sometimes they were dreams when he was asleep; sometimes they just pop up in between what ever he was doing. But these visions never appeared when he wished them to.

"Damn! I *hate* visions!"

Naruto opened his mental eyes and gazed forward at what he expected to be there. In front of him stood a tall dark mirror, two metres high and one and a half metres in width. Naruto silently (though unwillingly) took two steps forward, standing directly in front of the flat surface of the innocently looking mirror. Naruto felt a shiver travel down his spine as he watched the mirror shimmering into life, feeding off his Chakra and his still suppressed Bloodline ability.

The dark surface of the mirror faded away to show a small boy with blonde hair punching a small, dead tree until his seemingly gentle hands turned blood red with bruises. Naruto watched impassively as his younger-self tried to beat the dead tree into submission, using

training as an excuse to keep away the loneliness that ate at his young heart. He remembered those dark days but could do nothing to stop the incoming memories to flash in front of his eyes as if he were reliving them once again.

[FLASHBACK] **WARNING: ANGST!**

"Hn! Hn! Hn! Hn!" Seven-year-old Naruto grunted each sound as he slammed his small fists against the hard bark of the dead tree. With each punch, more splinters were forced into his tiny fingers and blood oozed out of these crevices continually. But Naruto ignored the physical pain, completely focused in the task at hand; he aimed to create a dent at least three inches deep into the bark by the end of the long day's training.

"Oi! Oi! Don't you think that's enough, Naruto?" The Pervert Sennin sat, leaning against a large tree on the outskirts of Naruto's training clearing. "It certainly won't help you if you bleed to death." He said nonchalantly with a straw stuck out of his lazy lips.

"Demons don't bleed to death." Naruto whispered harshly as he continued with his training, ignoring the Sennin's words.

*Jiraiya sighed heavily from the sidelines. "Come on Kid! Even **I'm** getting tired by just watching you!"*

"Hn!" Naruto winched in pain as a particular large splinter forced its way in between his knuckles but didn't pause the action to answer back with a final "NO!"

*Jiraiya manoeuvred himself into a more comfortable position, laying straight out on the floor and looking up through the canopies of the tall trees. He sighed again as his words fell on deaf ears. "Naruto... You are **NOT** a demon. How many times do I have to repeat myself?"*

Naruto slammed his right fist heavily into the blood stained trunk one last time before he retaliated back in anger. "If I'm not a demon, then

how come I can heal much faster than other people?! How come I have so much evil Chakra in me?! How come..."

*"Just shut up and listen for once, Naruto!" Jiraiya interrupted Naruto in middle of his rant. He sat up again and looked directly into the eyes of Naruto, eyes that seemed too young to hold so much pain. "What that bitch (3) did was her problem, not yours! You **have** to let go of her words, Naruto. You are NOT... I repeat... **NOT** KYUUBI! Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!"*

Naruto looked down, away from Jiraiya's determined gaze. "But what if they see me as the demon? What if they never accept me? Will I forever live in the shadow? Will I always be afraid? Afraid of being killed? Afraid of being hurt? Afraid to live?"

"That is for you to decide, Naruto! Your future is based on your choices, your decisions and your actions. You should be able to find a future that suits you! You are not a puppet, nor are you simply a dog following its owner. You are real and you are HUMAN, as such, your decisions will lead you to your appropriate destination. Have faith in yourself, I do!" Jiraiya gave Naruto a small smile before raising his hand to indicate that the boy should come forward so that he may bandage the injured hands.

[END FLASHBACK]

The training scene that occurred close of five years ago faded into the original darkness of the mirror, as the same time, the memories that accompanied it also disappeared back into their locked locations. Naruto shook his head to clear the slight depression that had overcome him with the arrival of his memories.

Naruto had indeed suffered a long period of depression in his younger days. He remembered that during those times, all he ever did was train. Training kept him busy - physically and mentally - so he may avoid acknowledging the loneliness that stood just on the outskirts of his sanity. Other than Jiraiya, he really had no one else to

trust during those first two years of travel, and as such, it deprived him immensely of any social interaction.

The pain resulting from training at such a young age also helped him focus. Naruto had learnt a long time ago that nothing could be gained without some pain or sacrifice. He had wanted to be strong, strong enough to protect himself from people like Mrs. Tanuki or others that may want to harm him. He had used the pain he felt, turned it into anger, and focused it into strength. As long as he had his pain and his anger, he would be strong. But even with this twisted logic in his mind, loneliness eventually won the battle and Naruto (for the first time in almost three years) reached out to an outsider, a person other than Jiraiya for comfort. And that person was Ellie.

Ellie was his first friend and he was still not strong enough to protect her. In the end, physical strength accounted for nothing because he couldn't even save a single soul. What's the point of protecting yourself if you are the only creature that gets to live? Is that why I treat Sasuke the way I do? Because I know what he went through? What he's going through now and what will be awaiting him at the end of his journey if he doesn't change? That... that emptiness that eats away the soul? I... I don't know...

A soft tear slid down Naruto's face as he watched the visions presented by the mirror, depicting his life in chronological order. He watched avidly as his younger self (now nine) stared down at his own blood stained hands, standing in a room splattered with so much blood that it was impossible to tell what the wall's original colours were. He was in so much shock at that time, and then fell into a second depression. Yeah... I became only a shell with no soul...

WARNING! WARNING! Suicide Attempt! Don't read if you can't stand it!

The visions shifted again, this time it displayed the same boy, now thin and frail, with deep sunken eye sockets and pale bony hands lifting a kunai up slowly as if it weighed a ton. The kunai travelled up

until it rested almost longingly next to the boy's throat. The nine-year-old closed his eyes, gave a soft smile, as he slitted the kunai's sharp edge across his own throat.

The mirror darkened suddenly, indicating that Naruto, too, had immediately lost consciousness after that incident. It had taken a whole two weeks before he had regained consciousness again and he wondered why he hadn't died. Considering he had been purposely starving himself for a whole months before he finally decided it was time to end his life as a demon carrier, only to have said demon bring him back from death's sweet clutches. Once again, the miracle of being Kyuubi's container - a demon's replicate or shadow - had resurfaced and pulled Naruto's shattered psyche even further into the spiral of depression and self-hatred.

Okay! You can come back now!

The next sight that presented itself on the mirror's surface in front of Naruto was of a woman, in pure white robes. She sat high on her golden throne and gazed silently with a blank expression down at the almost ten-year-old Naruto. The present Naruto remembered their first rocky meeting and gave a small ironic smile.

[FLASHBACK] Finally, the introduction to my other OC

"Name." Her voice was stone cold and it sliced through the thick tension in the air. For some reason, Naruto felt the compulsion to answer her. He had not spoken a single verbal word for almost two months and here, in front of this mysterious woman, he just couldn't fight her command.

"Uzumaki Naruto." Naruto replied in a very soft but raw voice, indicating that he hadn't been using it for a long time. He felt Jiraiya shift slightly in nervousness as he stood beside him. They both stood stiffly in front of the penetrating gaze of infamous Lady Oracle, of the Hidden Air village.

"Proof of your heritage." Naruto blinked in mental surprise. If she was really the famous prophetess that I've heard of, wouldn't she already know that I'm the real thing?! As if reading his mind, her icy gaze lifted from him and moved towards the seven old ladies who sat on the sidelines of the court room. Ah... the Counsel Elders... I see, she needed proof to appease the ruling Counsellors. I guess I can follow her order.

Reaching into his pant's side pocket, he lifted out one of his most prized possessions, the jade amulet left by his deceased mother. There was a surge in the uproar of talking and gasps of surprise that followed his action. He had heard from Jiraiya that anyone outside of the royal blood daring to touch that amulet, it would automatically give them an electrical shock. The fact that he could nonchalantly lift it up proves that he is of her blood. He is the son of Yuuki Uzumaki (4), official princess of the Hidden Air village, and sister to the famed Ruri Uzumaki (5), renowned as the Lady Oracle herself.

[END FLASHBACK] More about them in later chapters!

Hmm... Wonder what Aunt Ruri would think of me now if she saw me here... Then again, she'd probably already know about this even before it started. Chuckling sardonically, Naruto mentally shook away his dark thoughts. He had realised during that first meeting that his life was going to change drastically, but for the good or bad, he couldn't fathom. He still didn't know whether Jiraiya's decision to bring him to see his Aunt was a good idea even now.

After surviving his first suicide attempt, Jiraiya had kept a very close watch over him in the following months. Without any weapons at hand and knowing that he'd have a better chance at starving to death, Naruto had decided to live the rest of his life as a shell. He had locked himself within the darkness of his heart, wrapped the comforting emptiness around his soul and simply waited for Death to return. However, Jiraiya had other plans.

It still surprised Naruto that he hadn't even known he had an Aunt until he was ten years old. It had taken them a long time to reach the

Hidden Air village, which was literally hidden in the air, within the clouds, on top of one of the Legendary Mountains of history. Upon reaching the village itself, Naruto could not help but shudder as he felt the enormous amounts of Chakra just floating in the air. It was suggested that the Mountain itself was a natural spring for gathering large amounts of Nature's Chakra through out thousands of years. This was also why the villagers living there were so protective over their home as well as why they were so strong compared to shinobis in other countries, even the Leaf could not match up to the raw power and talent of those living in the Hidden Air village.

For the first time in his short life, Naruto had found a sanctuary that welcomed his existence. To the villagers of the Hidden Air, he was the son of their lost princess, which made him their prince. Not to mention that they value strength above all else, no matter the origin, as long as you could prove your worth, you are bound to end up with recognition and acknowledged.

For the two years that he had stayed in the Hidden Air village, Naruto had been treated as the hero he had always wanted to be seen as, the hero that his father had wanted him to be seen as. However, as always, everything good comes with a price. While the villagers welcomed him into their home as one of them, they also expected him to uphold the family traditions of the Uzumaki clan.

It was then that Naruto had understood why his mother and father had wanted him to stay in Konoha instead of the Hidden Air. Everyone living in the Hidden Air village was bound by hundreds of years of tradition and many of the population were still conservatives at heart. They were not brought up with knowledge on the outside world and had stayed in their safe haven for thousands of years, refusing to change their old ways. Upon arrival, Naruto had been forced to wear their traditional gowns, eat their traditional foods, follow all the rules that were standardised on the walls of the Counsel halls, abide by all the commands of the Counsel elders and many more actions that he would never have fathomed before had he stayed in Konoha. Even Jiraiya had found it difficult to put up with

all the pompous traditional ceremonies and events that occurred in the small village on a daily basis.

Naruto had felt like he was a captive there, living in an illusion of freedom hidden behind a very well formed cage. All of his actions were monitored down to the number of times he went to the toilet. It was just so frustrating to live a life when you know that seven very old and very cynical ladies would critically look over every action that you take.

Coupled with the intensive training that Aunt Ruri and her Shadow guard, Kaga-san (6) had given him, Naruto had spent two hellish years in the Hidden Air village trying his best to appease his only family. What he didn't realise at the time was that he was subconsciously trying to hold onto this second home without somehow failing the people whom accepted him or losing anything precious in the process. It wasn't until one of those training sessions where he almost collapsed in exhaustion before he realised that he was burning himself out.

After the incident with Ellie, Naruto had completely cut off any ties with Kyuubi's chakra. He had fought tooth and nail to keep Kyuubi's chakra from mixing with his own, and that had of course created severe side effects for his Chakra control and stamina. It was Aunt Ruri that had provided him with his solution – a pact with the demonic fox written in blood and bound by soul.

[FLASHBACK] Understand that this is in the past! As you already know, Naruto and Kyuubi act very different towards each other in the present time!

Three small figures stood in front of a giant gate as they waited patiently for the being inside to come forth towards their call. Soon, two large, burning red eyes could be seen from the other side of the infinitely large cage. A cage that was specially made for the most powerful youkai in the world, deceptively weak with only a small paper strapped to its great gateways with the word 'seal' written on it with the fourth's blood.

"Well... it seems like you've brought some guests, brat! What do you want?!" The Kyuubi's voice boomed and echoed through out the room. His voice bounced off the walls, and created ripples in the water on the floor.

The Lady Oracle stepped forward, directly in front of the Kyuubi no Kitsune, unafraid and unsurprised by his demand. "I am the Lady Oracle, current mistress of the Tenkun no buki and keeper of time. My name is Uzumaki Ruri."

Kyuubi's narrowed eyes racked over the small two-legged creature in slight surprise. "You are the blood descendant of the Uzumaki Hunters (7)?"

"Yes, I am." Ruri answered blankly. "Lord of the Underworld, Kyuubi no Kitsune! I am here today on behalf of my heir apparent and future successor, Naruto Uzumaki. And I wish to sign a blood pact with you."

Kyuubi gave a loud and maniacal laugh that made both Naruto and even Kaga-san shudder in nervousness, but Ruri stood tall and never wavered under the pressure.

"Yes! You really are one of the Hunter guardians! I can feel it in your blood! But that BRAT is your HEIR!!!??" Kyuubi roared with laughter, "It seems the once great Uzumaki clan are now nothing but a shadow of their past! To depend of such a lowly brat to uphold the name, honour and power of the Uzumaki, you must be desperate, Child of Oracles!"

"We are not here for you to mock us, Kyuubi no Kitsune! Are you willing to partake in the blood pact or not. State your answer and don't waste my time!" Ruri interrupted the barrage of sarcasm.

"Heh heh! Uzumaki's have always had their prides, even in death! So, Child of Oracles! What is in this Blood pact for ME!?" Kyuubi's voice boomed against the walls for a second time.

"Your freedom." Ruri's statement was followed by a long pause in silence from Kyuubi.

"Speak! Before I change my mind! Time Keeper!" Kyuubi demanded suddenly.

"In exchange for giving Naruto complete control over a portion of your power, I can ensure you a partial un-seal-ment. After Naruto have grown into his fullest potential and taken over my position, I can dedicate the rest of my time and life force to return you to the Underworld, as you belonged." Ruri explained.

"What type of partial un-seal-ment? Even YOU are not strong enough to unseal that man's Justus!" Kyuubi rebuffed back.

"Indeed, I cannot undo the Fourth's original seal for that is impossible. What I can do however is give Naruto an additional seal on top of the first that rectify part of the original seal's Chakra progress. I can manipulate it so that Naruto will have complete access and control to 10 or so percent of your original power and I can dedicate another part of your power to create separate Chakra life forms that can exist in the outside world. In that sense, it is a partial un-seal-ment, for part of you (namely your Chakra) is unsealed and free to roam about in the outside world. What say you to this agreement?" Ruri detailed her plan blandly, even her last question had been asked in a very forthright way with no fear.

A long pause followed her statements as the Kyuubi thought over her plan to see which part of it benefits him, and to what extent. "I would still be trapped in here; there is no way for you to completely unseal me! And even if I have not wanted to, that BRAT over there could always command part of my Chakra to leak into him! What is your reason for making this blood pact if either way HE wins?" He asked in the most reasonable way an angry demon fox would.

"To strengthen the bond and relationship between yourself and Naruto. Neither you nor Naruto may want to admit it, but your entire existence depends on the ongoing interactions between your two

different souls, minds, emotions and Chakra living in the same body. If I do not do this now, eventually one of you will merge within the other and will forever disappear from all of existence." Ruri patiently explained.

"If that is so, then there is a chance that I may take over that Brat's body and be free again on my own! I would not need for your interference!!" Kyuubi stated in retaliation, still slightly suspicious of Ruri's plan.

"There is a higher chance for you to be merged into Naruto instead of the other way around, for that is what the original seal that the Fourth Hokage had intended to do. On the contrary, as you may well know, Naruto has no plans to share his eternity with you as part of him. What the both of you may not know is that this type of sealing and merging will cause side effects in both of your existence. Not only will you, Lord of the Underworld, simply disappear as if you have never existed; Naruto, too, will suffer the side effects of having an immensely prolonged life, namely, over 300 human years of living before he finally dies! (8) The blood pact I propose can negate this process from happening by keeping the two of you separate and yet linked." Ruri tilted her head up in an arrogant manner, as if daring the Kyuubi to argue her point. *"Now, what say you to this deal?"* She demanded, tired of wasting her time in explanations.

Kyuubi gazed intently into Ruri's unmoving eyes for a long time before coming to its decision. "I accept. It seems I have no other choices but to accept. However, if I am not satisfied with the results, know that I will use any way I can to retaliate against the second seal."

"Agreed." Ruri simply stated, and that had ended the bitter anger and hatred between Naruto and Kyuubi due to the misunderstanding of the events following Ellie's death.

[END FLASHBACK]

It was after that incident that both Kibi and Kirin (9) were born, or in a more proper sense, they were created from Kyuubi's Chakra and hold part of his consciousness. Though he may share Naruto's emotions, the Kyuubi sees the world through Kibi and Kirin's eyes. However, they must always stay near or close to either Ruri or Naruto himself because they're depended on the Uzumaki blood to hold their existence together in the real world.

Naruto had always wondered what was in the famed Uzumaki bloodline that makes their blood so feared and yet desired by those whom had knowledge of it. He had heard from Kaga-san that the Uzumaki clan had once been a very powerful clan and the ruling party in the Hidden Air village, the oldest village in the world (10). Now, there was only him and his Aunt Ruri whom ruled supreme. It was kind of sad to find out that his supposedly great heritage had now crumbled into just the two of them trying to uphold the expectations of the world. But like many others, Naruto soon cracked under the intense pressure to be the best, to prove his heritage true, to become what the Counsel members want him to become, something which he was not.

It took almost killing himself in one of the training sessions using one of the Tenkun no buki that finally convinced him he could not keep the façade of happiness up forever. It was just a mask to appease those around him, though most of the villagers and especially Aunt Ruri knew he was crumbling under the pressure for a very long time. Jiraiya even threatened some of the Counsellors if they continued to force him to prove his worth.

Within a short two years of staying in the Hidden Air village under the harsh but firm tutelage of his Aunt Ruri, Naruto had went from a half-assed runt (probably only a strong Genin with some exceptional skills) to almost bordering the rank of Jounin. He had been exposed to a multitude of different fighting styles and jutsus, some of which were specifically catered for the Uzumaki and others were general techniques that needed a lot of practice to master. However, the more he learnt from the Hidden Air villagers, the more Naruto

realised that he could learn all these techniques, it would just be impossible, so he started to feel just content with what he already had.

And suddenly, out of the blue, Jiraiya confirmed with him that they were going back to the Hidden Leaf village. Naruto never questioned why Jiraiya wanted him to go back; perhaps it was because Naruto was starting to lose sight of what and who he was under the pressure of becoming someone completely different. Naruto didn't mind the sudden move at all, in fact, he felt relieved to leave. Without the burden of a whole society's expectations on his shoulders, Naruto felt that he was truly free to enjoy his freedom and to recover from all the psychological problems he had had in the past. But it was what his Aunt Ruri had told him to concentrate on that really influenced his decision in coming back to Konoha and face his past.

*[FLASHBACK] **Promise, this is the last one!! ;;;***

Two figures stood in front of a setting sun, their silhouettes created shadows that stretched along the mountainsides. One stood stiffly, either in nervousness or discomfort, he didn't know; but the other, stared blankly forward as if she had seen too many beginnings and too many ends. Finally, the latter spoke in a calm and soft voice.

"Naruto." The Lady Oracle began, "Where is your home?"

Confused but bowing automatically none the less, Naruto answered simply without thinking. "This is my home."

*"Then tell me." She continued after a very awkward silence in which Naruto fidgeted, afraid he had answered wrongly and would be punished. "What do you consider... is a **home** ?"*

Completely confused, Naruto thought over what he should say to that, wondering whether this was another one of her test to find out where his loyalty lies, but was interrupted in mid-thought. "I am not asking what you think I want to hear, Naruto. I want the honest truth. What do you think is in a home?"

After an even longer pause, Naruto bowed his head down slightly, unable to find an answer. "I don't know. I really don't know what a home is like. I've never had one..."

Surprisingly, the Lady answered back with a: "Neither do I..."

Naruto blinked at his Aunt in shock. Surely she must be mistaken! This entire village treats her like a Queen! She belongs here, with her people, with her family!

As if reading his mind, or in a better sense, she already knows what he was going to think about before he even thought them, the Lady Oracle rebuffed all his beliefs. "My only family was my sister, Yuuki. These are my people, my subjects and friends, but they are not my family, nor are the Air my home."

*Not really understanding, Naruto was about to ask her to explain when the lady willingly continued. "I believe a **home** should not feel like a cage. An invisible cage with a burden so great, it will either make you insane or wish for death. People say the home is where the heart is. But my heart does not lie here, not in these dying lands."*

Naruto gazed back at the now darkening sky and thought over his Aunt's words in silence. Finally, he asked: "Then what is in a home?"

"I was hoping you would know... or at least find out, when you return to Konoha." The Lady answered quietly, as if slightly uneasy with asking for a favour from her nephew. Naruto watched her from the corner of his eyes. Under the fading light of day, Aunt Ruri really didn't look as intimidating as she usually does with her blank expression and penetrating eyes as if she could see right through you and know your greatest secrets, which in fact, she does.

"Yeah... I guess I could find out." Looking back onto the ground in shame though, he continued: "Though I'm not sure whether they will accept me... or if they still hate me like before. I'm not even sure I'll like it there..."

"The Fourth Hokage was the chosen husband to be by Yuuki. And both he and my sister chose to stay and fight for the Konoha, instead of returning to the Air as they rightfully should. There must have been something attractive in Konoha that binds their lives and souls to it. I believe living there is the only way to find out what the people there have that we do not." The Lady answered directly, without pause or hesitation.

She then turned to look directly into Naruto's eyes as he too, looked back at her resolutely. "Believe in your heart's judgement. See with eyes unclouded by hate (11). Learn their ways and search for the truth that binds you to that place."

Naruto looked confused once again. "What binds me to that place, Lady?" He asked in a very soft voice, as if afraid that others would over hear.

"Konoha is your birthplace, it may well be your ultimate destination. You are bound there by the blood and heritage of your father, just as the same things of your mother and myself bind you here. You have already followed the path of your mother's name, now try to re-enact your father's legacy." The Lady sprouted off a lot of philosophical babble, which Naruto couldn't understand nor interpret, but he had memorised the next part of the conversation by heart. "Once you have found your answer, return to me and tell me: 'What was so great about Konohagakuru that your father - the Yondaime - would not only sacrifice his own life, but the future life of his son, to protect? What did your father see in Konoha that was worth so much pain and suffering?'"(12) Find that answer, and you will find your destiny."

Naruto blinked at her. "Are you trying to tell me that you would not die to protect the Hidden Air?"

The Lady's eyes had hardened into rock and gazed back in an intensity that was rather scary. "Yes. I would not die for this country, nor would I willingly suffer to keep it alive. This is because I know it is already dying, if not sooner, then later, it will perish. And after that... I have no where to go." She looked away sadly. "That is the truth

behind all those that live here. We have no place to go at all. So do not follow our path, Naruto. That is my only advice to you in this entire lifetime."

[END FLASHBACK] Uh.. That was confusing, even for ME!! ;;;

Finally, Naruto moved his gaze back at the mirror. All of his past experiences had already been shown, and now, he stood stiffly awaiting his future prophecies. He had known for a long time now that when ever he received visions of this sort, he was usually under intense pressure or emotional stress which allowed him to unconsciously activate the power hidden within him. However, because he had no knowledge prior about how to control the visions, they usually came in very strange forms and needed a lot of interpretation instead of the direct replay of the future in the Lady Oracle's case.

Once again, the mirror's surface blackened and faded back to reveal another scene, this time in abstract form. First he saw himself, badly injured and bleeding from all of his wounds. With his head down as if unconscious, Naruto's future self was thoroughly beaten up and hung stiffly from a rope strapped around his wrists that reached straight up into the heavens and disappearing into the clouds above. A burden from Heaven?Naruto interpreted. Something held from the sky? The Air?He questioned himself mentally.

The mirror image changed again, this time showing both Sakura and Sasuke strapped onto two large wooden crosses that stood in the midday glare of the sun (13). Sakura and Sasuke!! Sacrifices? They'd be sacrificed for whom? For what?Thinking back to the previous image. For me!? They'll be sacrificed for me?! And I couldn't help them because my own hands were tied. As if...

His thoughts were interrupted again when the next image showed up. The mirror's surface turned completely black, and suddenly, a circle completely filled with white appeared directly on its centre. Then another circle (this one, only its thick white edge was visible) appeared surrounding the first circle. And again, a third circle (also

only visible in its thick white edge – as in its centre was not filled) surrounded the second circle. All of the designs represented a circle within a circle within a circle, the exact replica of the Hidden Air Village symbol. This is the key! The hidden Air Village? The Hidden Air Techniques? My learning's from the Hidden Air? My relationship with the hidden Air? Naruto thought confused.

After that, the original Hidden Air symbol moved aside to the left side, leaving room in the centre for the mirror to form another abstract symbol. This time, it appeared to be the Hidden Leaf symbol (the one with the spiral, added arrow-edge thing with a flick of a stroke at the other end of the spiral). The Hidden Leaf symbol shrunk in size to match the other Hidden Air symbol but stayed in the middle of the mirror's surface. What does the Hidden Air have to do with the Hidden Leaf? What does this have to do with sacrificing Sakura and Sasuke? What does this have to do with me as a burden? Or is it **I'm** the one *with* the burden?

Following the two, the third key displayed by the mirror prophecy emerged and with it, Naruto gasped in shock. It was one of Kyuubi's eyes, the raging red slitted pupils of Kyuubi were recognisable anywhere and on anything. Kyuubi's symbol too, shrunk in size and was placed directly beside the two other symbols being displayed in front of Naruto to advise him on his future happenings. The Hidden Air, The Hidden Leaf, and Kyuubi.. The only connection between these three is Me! Or in a sense, Me and Aunt Ruri since mother married father and died for the Leaf. But most probably, this is about Me!

Naruto blinked in confusion as the three keys stayed on the Mirror's display as if taunting him to grasp onto the obvious truth. I'm the one with the burden... and somehow it leads to Sakura and Sasuke's sacrifice. It may very well mean their deaths. And somehow, I can stop it by combining the Hidden Air, the Hidden Leaf and the Kyuubi.. But what the hell does that mean?! Naruto grabbed onto his head as he felt a wave of headaches crashing through, making him slightly

dizzy. He felt that he was very close to the solution but it was still outside of his grasp.

Suddenly, all three symbols on the mirror glowed in bright colours to contrast against their black backgrounds. The Hidden Air symbol blazed in a vibrant blue colour to capture the essence of the air's movement and the sky in general. The Hidden Leaf symbol shone with bright yellow and green signifying the relationship between nature and life. Kyuubi's eye glowed an ethereal red pulsing with power beyond any man's comprehension. Slowly but surely, the three coloured symbols started merging into one another until finally there was only one symbol left on the screen, It pulsed and morphed with the multiple colours, creating a strange rainbow like effect that started to expand onto the different surface areas of the mirror itself. Soon the entire mirror's surface was covered by multi-coloured patterns.

The mirror then unexpectedly cracked under the power and force of the three combined. The cracks kept spreading until suddenly, the mirror simply shattered into a thousand pieces and thrown in every direction. Naruto quickly covered his eyes and face from the on-coming debris but to his surprise, they passed right through him to land heavily on the ground behind. He looked at the thousands of small mirrors that lay scattered in amazement. It doesn't hurt me.. What ever the effect is of coming the three together, the power that results may destroy everything else but it won't hurt *me* ! This means that I am the catalyst that starts the process of combining the three. But how? And what will be the results of that occurring?

However, to Naruto's disappointment, the scattered pieces of the mirrors started to disappear; soon there were none of the pieces on the floor anymore. This was the sign that the vision was ending. Naruto simply closed his eyes and waited for the eventual awakening to happen. You know, this wasn't as bad as a vision as all the others...were the last thoughts that went through his mind before he finally found consciousness.

===== **Outside of Naruto's mind!**
Finally!!

Naruto blinked to adjust his eyesight to the glaring light of day. When was the last time I've been awake... And where am I? Indeed, Naruto did not recognise his new surroundings. I thought I was still in the Forest of Death? Where is this place? There was a plainly thatched roof directly above him as he recognised the fact that he was laying on something soft, probably a real bed. Glancing around the room, looking at the different monitors and equipments, Naruto hazarded a guess that he was in some kind of medical facility. And since he was still alive, Naruto concluded that only two possibilities that could have happened, either he was captured and will be tortured by Orochimaru (since he didn't believe that the battle they had would truly throw the Sennin off their tracks) or he was saved by an outside force (since he really didn't believe Sakura and Sasuke could find a way out of Orochimaru's grips). Probably the later had happened, since I'm not in some kind of dungeon, then I must have been saved.

Hearing footsteps coming closer to his room, Naruto glanced steadily at the door, waiting for whom ever was going to visit him. The door slid open easily to reveal the pink head of his teammate, though Naruto instantly noticed that her hair was much shorter.

Sakura blinked at the now conscious Naruto, her eyes widened a tad in surprise and she immediately screamed in delight, making both Naruto and Sasuke (who was standing behind her) wince at the high pitch sound. She quickly launched herself to sit beside him and started pouring out a huge list of questions without giving Naruto the time to reply.

"Naruto!! You're finally awake!! We were so worried! How are you feeling? Are you okay? Oh what a stupid question, of course you're not okay? Are you hurting anywhere? Do you want me to call Haku or another one of the medic Nins? ..."

"Sakura! Shut up and let him speak!" Sasuke interrupted her tirage in irritation. However, Sasuke had to divert his attention else where as

the two foxes (whom had travelled with them) kept running around his feet in complete joy as they figured Naruto was alright, and almost toppling him over. They then ran away towards the still injured Naruto and literally jumped onto the bed to lick his face, wagging their tails happily.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Hey! That tickles!" Naruto laughed as he tried to manoeuvre the foxes' head away from his face. "Stop! You're slobbering all over me! Stop it! That's an order!" Immediately, the two foxes laid down comfortably on both of Naruto's sides, still wagging their tails happily.

Sakura blinked in surprise but just had to ask: "Do you know these two? They've followed us all the way from the second Chuunin Exam into the tower! They refuse to be parted from you for very long and in the end, the nurses just let them be?!"

"Yeah! I know them." Naruto smiled, as he reached out and ruffled both foxes' heads, resulting in them mewling in delight. "They're sort of my pets." He answered.

"Huh?" Sakura looked confused. "You're pets? But I thought you didn't have any? Not to mention, pets aren't allowed in the Chuunin Exam is it?"

Naruto started to shrug but instantly winced in pain at the move resulting in his still healing tissues on his back to stretch. "Well... I don't actually look after them or anything. But they come around when ever I need them or if I'm in danger..." Avoiding Sakura's confused expression, Naruto contented with rubbing the foxes' soft fur instead. Sakura was about to ask further questions when the calm Sasuke interrupted her again.

"Do you know where you are?" He asked, lifting one of his delicate eyebrows.

"Well, considering we're all alive, and Sakura had just mentioned the Chuunin Exam, I'd assume that we've reached the tower and are in

one of its medical facilities, am I right?" Sasuke nodded in response so Naruto continued. "What I'd really want to know now is how long have I been out? How did we escape and come here? Did you guys tell them about Orochimaru? And are we still participating in the Exam or are we disqualified?"

Sasuke smirked as Sakura frowned; it seems to them that Naruto was back to normal. "You've been out for three days and three nights, your fever due to the infection on your back broke late last night. I really don't know how we escaped Orochimaru, I was pretty knocked out by then but Sakura said that something happened and we were transported somewhere else. We did tell Iruka-Sensei and the rest of the Chuunins here about Orochimaru, but it seems as if they've already known. And we are still participating in the Chuunin exam since Sakura and I managed to grab the Earth scroll while you were still out."

Naruto acknowledged all the information given with a nod of his own. "So what's gonna happen now that the Hokage knows about Orochimaru, and what happened during the exam while I was out anyway? Seems like I missed a lot..." Naruto frowned slightly, since that basically implied that he had done almost nothing to help his teammates in this particular exam and was most probably a liability to them during their travels.

Sasuke shrugged indifferently. "From what we've heard, the Chuunin Exam goes as planned, but there will be Jounins and Anbu watching over everyone. As for what happened after you feel unconscious, well, me and Sakura carried you away from the scene, spent three hours moving and took another two hours to rest. Orochimaru caught up to us and I was knocked out, then..." Looking towards Sakura, she started off with the rest of the explanation.

"I really didn't know what was happening. Suddenly, this black barrier thingy surrounded you and you started disappearing into the darkness, then the same thing happened to Sasuke and me. When I finally opened my eyes, we were in a clearing somewhere else and there you were, exactly as you have been. I set some traps up and

rested for the rest of the night, with your pets standing guard." Sakura explained.

"It wasn't until the next day that we were attacked by Orochimaru's subordinates, the Sound Nin team challenged us while the two of you were still hurt. I held them off as much I could with the traps and weapons, but I wasn't strong enough to take on all three of them." Sakura lowered her head slightly in shame.

"Then Lee-san came and rescued us. But he too, was out-numbered and got hurt because of it too. After that, Ino, Choji and Shikamaru came to help, and even Lee-san's teammates appeared as well. But it was Sasuke-kun..." Here, Sakura sent her sparkling gaze at her long-time crush. "...defeated all of them and they immediately surrendered their scroll to us."

"After that, we met up with Kabuto-san..." Sakura did not notice Naruto's eyes narrowed at the conversation so far. "...and he helped us carry you all the way here to the Tower and since then, we've been here ever since!" Finally noticing Naruto's slightly uneasy expression, Sakura quickly continued her explanation, trying to bring comfort to the injured boy. "It's not your fault, Naruto! You did the best you could, and if it wasn't for you fighting off Orochimaru in the first place, we would of never been able to escape!"

Naruto shook his head to indicate that that wasn't what was worrying him, but before he could open his mouth to ask, Sakura launched into another tirade of words. "Well, we weren't the first ones here of course. That sand team you mentioned before beat us, and Kiba's team was here earlier than us also. We came on the second day with Kabuto-san's team, Lee-san's team came the day after! Yesterday, it was the horrid Sound team that made it – it seems like they were able to beat two opponents and get both the Ten and Di scroll. And finally, today, Ino's team also made it. This means that all of this year's Rookie Genin team made it into the Third round! Isn't that exciting!? I wonder what the last exam will be! The Hokage stated that everyone was to have a day's rest today before they start the next Exam tomorrow, so you don't have to worry about that now.

However, I don't think you should participate, especially with your back and..."

"Sakura!" Naruto stated firmly, interrupted her. "I appreciate your concern and I'm sorry I worried you! However, I've already decided to go all the way through this Chuunin Exam! I will not quit until I reached the end, no matter what the consequences. I hope you understand that and don't ever make any decisions for me!" He reprimanded firmly, making Sakura bow her head lower in shame. Gazing at Sakura's dejected look, Naruto sighed. "I'm sorry! I'm just a bit cranky at the moment because I hurt!" The comment led to Sakura displaying a small smile on her face.

Naruto then turned his expression to Sasuke: "Is there anything else I should know about?"

Naruto narrowed his eyes slightly as he watched Sakura sent an anxious expression at Sasuke and he glared back at her hotly, denying whatever intention she had of speaking. Following Sakura's defeated posture after Sasuke's glare; it was Sasuke who answered the question. "Nothing... There's nothing else you should worry yourself with."

Sasuke's hiding something! He's probably hurt somewhere but is too proud to tell me and forced Sakura to help keep that secret. Damn that boy's pride! Wincing again as another sharp pain shot up his spine, reminding him that Kyuubi hadn't finished its healing process yet, Naruto just had to drop the subject for now. "Okay, I'm gonna take a nap now, so if anything comes up, then call me..."

He gave a large yawn and positioned himself carefully on the soft bed so to ease his back's pain (14) enough for him to fall into a comfortable sleep. He did not see both Sasuke and Sakura giving each other intended looks and they softly left the room, leaving behind one sleeping boy and two small foxes.

(1) Kit, short for Kitling, inspired by stories like Covenant by bubblytoki. In my story, the Kyuubi and Naruto have a very strange 'love-hate' relationship. The Kyuubi doesn't treat Naruto like a father would a son, like in Covenant ; but he doesn't hate Naruto as much as the manga and anime's implications. In this story, they... sort of 'care' for each other but they will never openly admit it. They've come to accept each other's existence and know that they are never alone because one lives in the other. Their emotions truly are 'linked' – which is why it's easier for Naruto to accidentally access more of Kyuubi's powers when he is angry – hence the eyes turn red and slitted. They've agreed upon the 'pact' after the Ellie's incidence and it helped build up Naruto's strength and trust in the Kyuubi, but Naruto had never really recovered from what he went through when he was nine and so, he is still hesitant in using the Kyuubi's powers.

(2) Uh... I made up this curse for Kyuubi. ;;; While other people say: "For the love of God!", Kyuubi says: "Of all the Hell's flames!!" Stupid... I know... ;;

(3) Referring to Mrs Tanuki.

(4) The name "Yuuki" has got NOTHING to do with the upcoming Naruto movie. They may use the same name but she is a different "Yuuki Hime", an OC of this story and belonging to ME!

(5) I actually wanted to introduce her AFTER the prelims but since the story itself is screwing with my original plotline, I just gave in and let it do what ever it wants. So here it is, my other OC! Uh.. I'll be the first to admit that some of you will probably complain that she's too much of a 'Mary Sue' in this story, but like Naruto, she has her reasons.

(6) The name of the other main OC! He appeared shortly in Chapter 8, remember?

(7) SECRET!!! Will be explained MUCH later in the story line!

(8) COMPLETE AU! Don't know if that is happening or not, but in this story, I'm assuming that it would.

(9) The names of the two foxes. The golden brown one is called Kibi, while the chocolate brown one is called Kirin. More about their stats will be presented later, just keep your attentions on them!

(10) SORRY!! It's very similar to Return of the Unforgettable ! In this story, the Hidden Air village is the oldest Ninja village in the world and all the advance bloodline families DO come from that particular village (including the Hyugas, Uchihas, Inuzukas, Aburane, Naras, etc.) but I will explain later WHY they have all left the Hidden Air village. ;; Sorry, I just couldn't change it any other way! This is actually very important to the plot! MASSIVE apology to the author of Return of the Unforgettable .

(11) I believe this was an exact quote from the movie: Princess Mononoke ! It just kinda fit the bill. ;;

(12) This may sound familiar because it was an exact quote taken from the Prologue. I'm trying to link all the different parts of this story together to form one coherent plot line so I have to always repeat this process of 'introduce a theme' – 'develop the plot' – 'explain the past' – 'redirect it to the original theme' etc. So please bare with me if it seems confusing.

(13) I must apologise for all Christian believers here! I did NOT mean to insult you or offend you by using this symbol of Christ, it was just a mean to represent the abstract idea that I wanted to portray. I give you all a sincere Apology for using it without consent but please don't hate this story because of it! Oo

(14) I know that people with back burns SHOULDN'T actually sleep on their backs, but for this story's sake, let's just say that Naruto's the exception! ;; Not to mention, even though Kyuubi has started the healing process almost three days ago, but since the injuries caused by the Tenkun no buki is so extensive, it takes some time. Also on another note, since Naruto is unconscious and also very unwilling to

let Kyuubi help, Kyuubi can only send a small amount of Chakra to heal him at any one time, prolonging the healing process even more. Yes, Naruto is very stubborn about healing at the normal rate that most normal people do.

See! See! Naruto is NOT a 'Mary Sue'! I hope that proves it to you all! He is a VERY complex character that had suffered through quite a lot and still managed to stay somewhat sane! His life does not follow a linear format, instead it goes up and down constantly, giving him times of pleasure as well as times of depression.

Okay people, thank you all so very much for every single review that I have ever received. You have no idea what great pleasure it is to actually read through them and get ideas and encouragement to keep going!

Do NOT expect another double chapter update next time around! I was working on these two chapters every night while I should be working on my project, – which is why the project itself turned out crap in the end... ;; And I'm TIRED!! But I promise I'll try to get it all to you guys as soon as possible!

Please thank all my beta-readers (all 4 of them) for helping me clean up whatever mistakes I've put up in there! Thanks a bunch! You guys!

Next chapter: Preliminary Finals!!!

Preview: "Naruto. The lady is here to see you after your battle..." Naruto's eyes bulged slightly in surprise and he gulped in nervousness. His body started reacting to the news like always, it started sweating in fear. He whispered back harshly, ignoring the curious looks on his team-mate's faces: "WHY?"

Chapter 11

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Ten: Prelims Part 1

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

dfourthhorseman, xxSilverwingxx, Ookima, Akito, silversnowpetals, Xero, Stoictimer, Anael Razualle, Anonymousse, hmr, Inu-chan613, Sierra-Falls, Kuroi Hikari, crazy-lil-nae-nae, Manga-lover123, Really Quite Anonymous, narusakuwooo, insanechildfanfic, SilverKnight7, Whoa, Gopu, Wormkaizer, Licht Seiger, Animebop, BigAzxDaddy: Thank you all soooo very much for your supportive reviews. I KNOW I'm slowing down so I will really need all your encouragements now more than ever.

Rash: Naruto will only have ONE actual summon – frogs; if I do give him any other animals, then they are 'special summons'. That basically means that Naruto can call them forth without using the normal summoning contract. And just to tell you, Naruto CANNOT summon a phoenix. I think the one you were referring to was the Tenkun no buki – Kakuhouou no hane. It is not a summoning animal, it's a summoned WEAPON – that was created by fusing an ancient phoenix into said weapon.

Medea: Yeah. I agree with the footnotes thing. I kinda get carried away. nn;; Gomen. And thanks for the support over the 'Cross' thing, I only planned to tell people that I didn't mean any offence by it. It's just a very small part of the story.

Selene: Thanks for volunteering to help. Well, to tell you the truth I've just been very busy lately, and I've kinda hit a small writer's block as to how I want the rest of the fights to turn out. But in this chapter, you'll see what I finally decide upon. Ruri and Kaga will be introduced VERY soon, straight after the Prelims (if I ever get there...) and there are also other OCs I've been planning on creating as kinda Bodyguards for Naruto, but they won't be appearing until the 2nd Arc. Kyuubi may be old and powerful, but in this story, he doesn't usually spend much time outside of the Demon realm and the only time he does appear, it's to wreck havoc. So even though he may know a LOT of things, the variety of human jutsus is NOT one of them. nn And anyway, that's what Ruri's for.

Reader: I'm sorry about the flashbacks. But I really needed them in order to capture the atmosphere at the time. If I just told it to you, it wouldn't have felt the same. But I promise, I will be cutting back on the flashbacks so that only one or two long ones exist. People seem to want to know what Naruto had went through before so I saw it as an opportunity to reveal his secrets. The one month training period is VERY important, I don't have time to dump any flashbacks in that plot, and as for the author's tags, I know they're annoying sometimes, but I felt that that particular chapter really needed them, especially for those people who can't stand gore, so yeah. I'll try... That's all I can really promise.

Emotwo: Gomen ne. Lee won't be slapping Naruto's back anytime soon. He was there when they re-banded Naruto's back, so he'll be staying clear of it for a while yet.

SJ: Arigato for the ideas, I've actually had quite a number of people asking for claws and yes I will be putting it in the story but it won't come out until much later.

Dragonmage: Major apology for that. Will change it once I upload this chapter. Promise.

Hitomi no Ryu: Sorry about the 'Kittling', but well, believe it or not, my stupid Microsoft words' dictionary says it *is* a word. Which is why it

kept on changing it to this form. nn;; I don't get it either. As for the reference of the Christian cross and the Nazi sign, I have nothing to say. But another reviewer of mine had something to say, so this is what SS had to add about that: *"This is totally incorrect. The Nazi Sign is rotated about 45 degree and then reflected along the y-axis. The sign on Neji's forehead is actually derived from a Buddhist/Taoist symbol (can't remember which offhand)."* As for the Mary-Sueness of the whole thing, still working on it... Um.. what questions ("JUST ANSWER YES OR NO!") were you talking about. If it's about your weapon idea, YES, I will be using it in upcoming chapters; if its about the frogs in the prelims, then NO, I'm not using them. Anything else I've missed.

Insanity: I've had people asking for all sorts of claws. nn Yeah, I will be imputing some kind of claws in there somewhere but I don't think it'll be part of Naruto or Gaara's artillery. Sorry but Thanks for that anyway. I'm quite glad that someone actually picked up on Naruto's change of character inside his mind with Kyuubi. It's amazing what people actually MISS in this story. I deliberately made it so that.. uh.. 'INNER' Naruto is around the same as the original Naruto from the manga/anime series. But NOBODY seems to pick up on it. Naruto is frail; he just hides it better. And as for the Hidden Air village, there is a ton of secrets behind that particular issue. Kibi and Kirin's secrets won't be revealed yet. And Jiraiya does play a role in this chapter but he doesn't help with the sealing. The OCs will come when they come.. or when ever I actually finish these prelim exams. As for what a 'mary-sue' is, well, it's supposed to be an original character that seems to be too perfect, with no flaws. But even I'm still confused about what constitute a 'flaw' and what doesn't. nn;; Thanks for the translation of "Angel's wrath", looking forward to using it very soon.

Littlepet: Yeah, I do go to Narutofan quite often, but they still don't have too much information on the Rasengan, most of it is still speculation.

A: I know a lot of people seem to complain that Naruto (and most definitely in the future – Ruri and Kaga-san) are Mary-Sues. Which I

admit, in some aspects, they are. But I don't see them as Mary-Sues, mainly because I know their pasts. I believe that what doesn't break a person, makes them strong. So in the cases of Naruto, Ruri and Kaga, they have been through so much hardship that they can be what I usually term as strong, or at least, stronger than most other people. They DON'T have cliché masked behaviours like Kakashi and Jiraiya's perverted attitudes or Tsunade's gambling habits, but that does not mean that they are any less REAL. They're just more... normal... ish... I think. I hope you understand that... nn;;

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. LOTS OF SWEARING!! A lot of this is the same as the manga/anime, but I twisted some parts of it to make it more interesting. Um.. I'm skipping Shikamaru's fight, can't be bothered.. nn;; I tried to fit everything in, I really did, but its too LONG!! So I've kinda cut it in the middle. DON'T KILL ME!!!

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 10

Naruto stood stiffly next to his two-team mates in the giant conference/battle room. I wonder what this last exam will be... However, to his surprise, instead of immediately starting the next exam, the Hokage launched into a long speech about the origins of the Chuunin Exam as a replacement for war between the Shinobi nations to prove their strengths. Naruto wasn't really interested in the balance of power between nations, because it was these types of desire for power that almost drove the Hidden Air village to the brink of destruction. From the history lessons taught by Kaga-san, Naruto understood why the ruling Counsel of the Hidden Air village had set up the rules to forbid anyone within their ranks to interfere with

outside events. After all, if they didn't have any contact with the outside world, why would any of them desire to change? Naruto was the only exception to the Hidden Air village who really wanted to change.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Naruto was surprised when he finally noticed another familiar face in the room. Standing on the edge of the room, next to some of the other Leaf Jounin instructors was Jiraiya. What is that Pervert Sennin doing here? Naruto thought with narrowed eyes. Naruto ignored all the verbal arguments and counter arguments about the actual purpose of the Chuunin exam while he focused completely on the impassive face of his unconventional sensei. Something's up! He has a grim expression on his face, something is definitely bothering him!

Finally with the arguments over and done with, Naruto was again taken back by the announcement that there were simply too many participants and they would have to conduct a preliminary examination now to cut down at least half of the contestants. Arguments arose again, but Naruto knew that it would lead to nothing; the adults had already made up their minds anyway.

"So ... for those of you who are not feeling well, and those who feel like quitting after these explanations, please come forward now." Said the sickly looking man, known as Gekkou Hayate, also the referee for the third preliminary exams.

Naruto immediately narrowed his eyes in suspicion as Kabuto raised his hand in a slight 'give-up' pose. Good riddance, but I don't trust him... wonder what he has planned. Suddenly, Naruto shifted his gaze back to Anko and the third Hokage when his sharp hearing picked up his name being whispered between them.

Watching how Sasuke clutch at his neck tightly, struggling against the pain of the curse seal, Anko whispered to the third Hokage standing beside her. "Perhaps we should have the Uchiha removed from the exam to have his wounds treated. He had refused treatment

when he first arrived, opting to just rest his body for a few days, but even now, he still struggles with the pain. Hokage-sama, I think..."

Kakashi interrupted at this point: "Hm. I don't think he'd appreciate that. He's an Uchiha after all." Looking over his three students for the past months, his gaze rests resolutely on the heavy bandages underneath Naruto's new shirt. "I'm more worried about Naruto's injuries. Looks like he used *it* again when he promised me he wouldn't."

"Heh. Naruto's the most stubborn one out of the bunch of them. He'll hate you if you dare take this opportunity away from him." Said a voice behind the three. They all looked back at the ironic grin now plastered on Jiraiya's face.

"Jiraiya-sama!" Anko exclaimed loudly since she had not noticed his entrance into the room before. With this sudden exclamation, every genin in the room shifted their gaze in shock onto said man; after all, it isn't everyday that one of the legendary three Sennins was in their presence.

"I say we let both of them continue for now, and if the curse seal does activate, we'll stop it then. Hell, I'll even help you if need arises." Jiraiya smirked in response to Anko's gapping fish impression.

"BUT it could KILL them both!!" Anko whispered harshly in retaliation, coming out of her stupor. Hearing the anxiety in her own voice, she blushed slightly and then instantly scowled, trying to hide her concern. "It's not like I CARE or anything! It's just that... well..." Stumbling half way through her sentence, Anko tried to will back her arrogant attitude. "This *is* the last Uchiha heir, and we don't want anything happen to him, now do we?" She glared at Jiraiya hotly. "Not to mention that Naruto is *your* damn student! Are you really so crass that you don't care how he performs."

Jiraiya simply shrugged off her insult. "That won't stop him. I don't know about the Uchiha boy, but Naruto has more tricks up his sleeve

than the number of snakes in yours. He'll be fine." Looking over at his student for the past six years, Jiraiya also noted the two additions. "And it seems like Kibi and Kirin are with him, so he should be better than fine."

Jiraiya strode confidently forward towards Naruto, his eyes determinedly focused on said boy. Everyone else watched in silence as the tall, white haired man stood directly in front of Naruto, then bent over slightly to whisper into the boy's ear. No one could hear what was being said between the two but curiosity was beginning to build.

"Naruto, The lady is here to see you after your battle..." Jiraiya softly whispered into Naruto's ear.

Naruto's eyes bulged slightly in surprise and he gulped in nervousness. His body starting to react to the news like it always did, it started sweating in fear. He whispered back harshly, ignoring the curious looks on his team mates' faces: "WHY?"

Jiraiya simply shrugged. "I got a message from Kaga saying that you had some trouble during the second exam and that I was responsible for looking out for you until you meet the Lady. He said she's already here waiting in the Hokage's tower. So after the prelims, you are to go see her directly."

"Damn! Shit!" Naruto swore under his breath. He really didn't want to see his Aunt, especially after slacking off on all his practices and studies. He knew she would already know about them, her being an oracle after all. But still, he hadn't wanted to face her so soon. And knowing her, she'd have tons of torturous practice sessions all planned out for him after the prelims.

"Naruto." Jiraiya brought him out of his musings.

"What?" Naruto retorted hotly. Jiraiya smirked.

"Don't die. You're still too young." Jiraiya continued to smirk and quickly turned away ignoring the glare Naruto sent his way. The big man smothered a chuckle under his breath and thought to himself. Damn. Things are gonna get exciting with Ruri here.

Finally, with that interesting event over with, Naruto was immediately swamped by his curious teammates and newly found friends.

"Psst!" Sakura whispered. "What was all that about?" However, Naruto only shook his head and refused to answer. After a while, Sakura gave up on pressuring him. It was then that Hayate initiated the preliminary third exam and the first pairing was none other than Uchiha Sasuke versus Akado Yoroi.

At the referee's signal, Yoroi threw three shurikens at Sasuke, whom fended them off with his own kunai. Now, with the added disadvantage of not being able to mold Chakra at all, Sasuke was left without the use of any of his jutsus, including the simple manipulation of Chakra enhanced kunais. He was completely dependant on his Taijutsu skills.

Dodging his opponent's fist, Sasuke dropped down low and swept Yoroi off his feet, resulting in his adversary landing heavily on his back. Sasuke immediately pressed his advantage by trying to stab the other with a kunai but his opponent used both hands and grabbed on Sasuke's wrist to stop the attack from connecting. Suddenly feeling weakness in his right arm, Sasuke was startled and instinctively took out another kunai using his other hand and slashed the arm that was holding his right arm immobile and weak. Once released, he quickly leapt backwards to a safer distance trying to figure out what had just happened.

Yoroi staggered back in pain and instantly let go of Sasuke's right arm. Looking over at the cut, he winched at seeing the deep slash bleeding profusely across his own arm. The older genin glared hatefully at Sasuke. "You'll pay for that, brat!" He sneered and lunged at Sasuke.

Blocking and dodging most of his opponent's blows, Sasuke was beginning to wonder why his adversary had not employed any long range attacks or any jutsus for that matter. However, his moment of inattention and confusion would cost him dearly. Seeing an opening, Yoroï immediately pushed forward and grabbed onto Sasuke's forehead and slammed the smaller boy onto the hard surface of concrete underneath them using a basic leg hook. Surprised at the move and out of breath from the impact, Sasuke could only lie still as he felt his Chakra and energy quickly leave his body from Yoroï's hands.

That's when he realised why Yoroï did not employ any long range attacks, because his techniques were more suited to short range hand to hand combat, able to drain his opponent's chakra! In slight panic, Sasuke struggled with all his strength and managed to kick his opponent away finally.

"Damn... you... my chakra?" Sasuke grunted in pain as he tried to catch his breath.

"Heh, heh. Seems like you finally noticed. I take it you've never seen this Jutsu before huh?" Yoroï stood arrogantly over the slightly worn looking Uchiha.

"Sasuke-kun! Don't give in!" Sakura yelled from above. Naruto, too, standing stiffly next to Sakura, also gave his silent support to his teammate. He did not want to see his teammate in such a predicament and mentally berated himself for not helping him earlier. DAMN IT! I knew something was wrong with him but I was so tired yesterday to find out what it was or if I could help. Now, what ever he's suffering from is forcing him not to use any Chakra at all. This is no longer just a drawback, it's a damn burden in its own right! He ranted at himself mentally as he shifted nervously, holding tightly onto the rail almost to the point of bending it.

Climbing slowly on to his feet, Sasuke looked up at his cheering teammate. However, instead of looking depressed, his expression

looked more hopeful as he gazed avidly at Rock Lee, now standing directly besides Naruto and Sakura. That's it!

Within seconds of his realisation, Sasuke mimicked Lee's previous moves. Increasing his speed as he ran towards his enemy, Sasuke managed to launch the man upwards into the air with a savage kick to his opponent's jaw from underneath him. Following up with a 'Leaf Shadow Dance', he smirked at the man above him and proclaimed: "From now on, it's all original".

All of a sudden, Sasuke felt a surging pain on his neck, and the burning sensation of the curse seal quickly spread through out his body. Sasuke froze in mid-pain as he vaguely heard Naruto and Sakura yelling out his name in concern. DAMN IT! I will NOT lose HERE! I can't... Can't let them worry about me forever! I just... I just want to prove to them... Naruto... Sakura... that I can take care of myself! That I don't need them to always help me! I want to prove to myself... THAT I HAVE GROWN STRONG ON MY OWN!!With that last thought, Sasuke forcibly pushed the pain back, driving the seal back to recede into its original state with his 'willpower' alone.

Finally, back in control of his body, Sasuke executed a series of kicks, punches, and body slams to complete his Lion combo. Yoroi was left unconscious on the floor, as Hayate, the referee, announced Sasuke the winner of the match and his progression to the final examination.

With the end of the match, all eyes were focused on Sasuke at this moment, each one of them having their own thoughts on the matter, but no matter what, it inevitably led to the same idea - 'this boy is strong.'

Eventually, the medic ninjas came out to collect Yoroi, and Naruto was surprised that Haku was one of them and waved at him slightly in welcome. The medic nins tried to move Sasuke too, but Kakashi was quick to say that the boy was going to follow him. When Sasuke tried to protest, Kakashi refused and they both left the room together.

Watching them leave and sensing that Sasuke was not out of danger yet, Naruto sent Jiraiya a silent message through his eyes. 'Please follow him and watch him!' he pleaded silently. Sensing the request Jiraiya nodded in acquiescence and left the room with a small puff.

A few minutes later, everyone was ready to start the next match, which turned out to be Zaku Abumi versus Aburame Shino. The two fighters both stepped onto the stage proudly, though one looking more injured and ragged than the other.

Initially with both his arms in slings, Zaku stunned everyone in the entire stage when he moved one of his arms freely from the sling. He ran with it outstretched towards Shino, slamming it towards his opponent's head while Shino blocked the attack. Releasing a powerful 'Zankuuha' (Air slicing blast), he shocked the rest of the audience and injuring Shino in the process.

However, after a short struggle, Shino eventually stood up and stared blankly at his adversary as if nothing had happened to him. Upon his face and on his wounds, slowly appeared these small black bugs; it looked as if they were tending to Shino's wounds, helping it heal. Zaku looked on in disgust at the apparent nonchalance of Shino with his enigmatic insects. Then a lot of soft chirping sounds could be heard through out the room and Zaku turned around just to discover that hundreds of these bugs were surrounding him from behind.

Shino introduced them as 'destruction bugs' and warned Zaku that if he intended to fight the bugs, Shino would attack and if he intended to fight Shino personally, then the bugs would attack. He then demanded that Zaku surrender if he didn't want to die.

Zaku refused. He lifted his other hand from its bandaged position, showing Shino that he too had a trump card up his sleeve. Now with both hands available, Zaku grabbed a few shurikens and kunais from his waist pouch and threw them in all directions around the room. While Shino and the bugs dodged the onslaught of kunais and shurikens, he took this chance to jump towards one side of the room,

running straight towards the walls and jumping again to attach himself directly onto the wall's surface. Zaku then turned around and smiled cruelly at Shino and his bugs (as they had already dodged all the kunais and shurikens).

Holding both his arms up in a ready action, Zaku tried to call forth two powerful Zankuuha attacks at the same time, able to completely obliterate whatever was present on the room's floor. However, to his and the viewing audiences' shock, instead of his attack coming forth, a sudden 'BOOM' sounded through out the room followed by his scream of agony as both of his arms were abruptly severed apart from his body. Suffering from the pain, Zaku lost his concentration on sticking to the walls, and he fell forward into unconsciousness even before he felt the physical impact of his body hitting the hard floor.

It seemed that Shino had blocked Zaku's air holes (within Zaku's arms) with the bodies of his bugs previously, so the air pressure had no where to go except blowing a hole for itself, which lead to Zaku's destroyed arms. Shino was pronounced the winner of the match and progressed to the third exam.

Kakashi had just completed the special seal onto Sasuke's curse seal when he felt the familiar power signature of the legendary snake villain. "Orochimaru!" He called out in anger. "Come out!"

From the surrounding darkness, emerged said man. He held an evil smirk on his face as he watched Kakashi from afar. "Good to see you again, Kakashi-kun. But let's not waste time on pleasantries, I'm here for the boy." The smirk never left his face.

Kakashi readied himself into a fighting stance and began summoning forth the Chidori. "As if I'll let you get your hands on Sasuke and corrupt him as you like. Your ambitions will end today! Even if I must sacrifice my life, I will protect Sasuke from you!"

Orochimaru's evil laughter filled the room. "You crack me up, Kakashi-kun. Do you really think you can stop me?" He asked with

an evil smile on his face.

"He may not be able to. But I sure can." A voice from behind Orochimaru sneered angrily at him.

Orochimaru stopped in mid trek, but decided not to turn around. "Well, it's been a long time, Jiraiya. How have you been?" He asked pleasantly with an undertone of malice.

"Cut the crap, Orochimaru!" Jiraiya bellowed. "Are we gonna fight sometime today or not?" He demanded and threw a kunai at the hateful man.

"Heh heh. No. Not today, I'm afraid. I still have much to do." Orochimaru said as he puffed out of existence, just barely avoiding the kunai thrown by Jiraiya.

After the snake man's disappearance, Jiraiya cursed under his breath. Seeing Orochimaru again had brought back all his malice towards his former teammate, completely clouding his judgement by anger. After breathing in some calm breaths, Jiraiya told Kakashi to take Sasuke to the Anbu and keep him safe. He'll be returning to the preliminary exams to watch the rest of it. Kakashi thanked him for his help and left on his way with the still comatose Sasuke in his arms.

After the creepy presentation of Shino's powers, the next match belonged to Tsurugi Misumi versus Kankuro. Just as the battle started, Kankuro quickly released the large bandaged object from being strapped to his back and blocked the frontal assault from Misumi with his right wrist.

However, to his surprise, the arm that he had blocked suddenly bent at an unnatural angle, Misumi quickly grabbed onto his other wrist and crushed it, forcing Kankuro to drop whatever he had within the bandaged object. Kankuro shouted in alarm and pain at having his wrist broken so easily. Misumi then continued to twist and wrap

himself around Kankuro's body, crushing certain body parts, until he had completely wrapped himself around his opponent.

"I don't know what kind of tool you use, but I won't allow you to use it. Surrender now or else I'll keep on tightening my grip until I break all of your bones." Misumi suggested, but Kankuro, still struggling with the pain of his broken wrist, just replied with a breathy: "Heh... you can try." And then 'SNAP' Kankuro's head lay hanging from his neck.

Almost everyone in the room was rendered speechless at the quick but efficient killing of the Sand Nin with no remorse showing on the Leaf Nin's face. They had all thought that Kankuro was dead, it had happened so quickly and so seamlessly that they had no time to wonder about the true abilities of both participants. However, they were all wrong.

Without warning, Kankuro's supposedly broken neck suddenly twisted in a complete, and artificial 180-degree turn. The head attached to Kankuro's supposed body revealed itself to the world as only a puppet, and the real Kankuro unwrapped himself from his hiding place within the bandaged object. His control over his Karasu (puppet) was flawless and efficient, immediately rendering Misumi his slave within the arms of his puppet. Ultimately, Misumi surrendered, as he could not find a way to escape Karasu's clutches and the match went to Kankuro of the Sand.

By the end of Kankuro's match, Kakashi had returned from wherever he had stationed Sasuke. Both Sakura and Naruto had welcomed him back and had asked about Sasuke's condition, of which, Kakashi only shrugged in response. Naruto also noticed that the pervert Sennin, Jiraiya, had also returned, still standing by the third Hokage. He was just wondering how he could catch his errant (though no longer official) Sensei's attention when he heard a small gasp from beside him. Glancing at Sakura's shocked expression, he looked towards the name's board. It displayed the names: Haruno Sakura versus Yamanaka Ino.

Sakura had frozen for a few seconds after reading the names on the board but then she turned slowly and started walking towards the stairs stiffly. That is, until Naruto called out to her. "Sakura." She turned her head to look back at him. "Don't think of it as fighting your friend in a competition, think of it as proving to yourself you are stronger than her, and can protect her if the need arise. Proving to yourself that you have grown strong. You are her rival after all." She nodded to him slowly and continued on her way, her blank expression slowly changed to a determined one.

Both girls stood proudly on the stage facing each other. Ino spoke first. "Sakura, I never expected I'd be fighting you of all people in the prelims." Ino looked at Sakura's determined face and thought to herself. I had wanted to though. After seeing your fight against the sound ninjas, I had thought about it none stop. What would happen if we fought now? Would you react the same way as always and cower behind me, or would you stand tall and actually defeat me? I think I already know the answer, but I need to make sure. I need to make sure that you truly deserve to beat me. Show me, Sakura! Show me how much you have grown!

Ino tensed slightly as Sakura released her forehead protector from the top of her head and held it in front of her. "Ino. I'm no longer the little girl you once knew. I don't need you to protect me any more. In fact, it might go the other way, Ino. You might need me to protect you." She stated calmly as if it were a fact.

Ino glared back angrily. "Sakura! Don't get ahead of yourself! Don't forget that you use to be 'Cry-baby Sakura', who couldn't even stand up for yourself! Don't forget all the times that you needed ME to stand up for you! Don't..."

Sakura interrupted Ino in mid-speech: "I won't forget, that is why I've become stronger. I won't run away from my weakness, but I refuse to let that weakness fester. I have worked damn hard to get here, Ino, and I still want to become stronger. Right now, right here, that is all I care about. To show you how strong I really am." Internally, Sakura had to find all the reasons in the world to force her to fight her friend.

I also made a promise to myself... I won't be left behind by the boys, I can't be the only one not to pass. Sasuke has already passed to the final exam, and knowing Naruto, he'll find a way there too. I won't let anyone or anything stand in my way of following them, even if that person is you, Ino. Sakura thought to herself resolutely.

Slowly, Sakura tied her forehead protector around her forehead in the traditional way of the ninja. After watching her for several moments, Ino did the same. "Fine. Let's do this. Let me see how strong you've become, Big-forehead Sakura-chan!" And with that, they were off.

Sakura ran quickly towards Ino and threw three kunais towards her. Ino stood stationary in her position, grabbing onto her own kunai and blocked each one of Sakura's kunais. To her surprise, the kunais were chakra enhanced and simply rebounded in mid air and return to striking her. Distracted by the strange kunais, Ino completely missed Sakura's reaction as she slipped into Ino's side and gave her a powerful punch that launched Ino several metres away, sliding on the concrete floorboards. With Ino knocked away; Sakura recalled her kunais back towards her.

"If you think you can defeat me with that level of skill, Ino, then YOU'RE WRONG! I told you, I'm not the girl I use to be. So do NOT underestimate me." Sakura said firmly as she readied herself again.

On the above balconies, Lee had started chanting encouragements while the rest of the people there stared with silent contemplation.

Ino stood slowly and gave Sakura a very angry and determined look. Wiping away the small trickle of blood from her mouth, Ino also readied herself in a battle stance. As if waiting for a silent signal, the two girls immediately launched towards each other again. This time, the sound of metal against metal as two kunais struck against each other could be heard through out the room. Sakura retreated her kunai and lowered herself quickly, trying to trip Ino off her feet. Ino did a back flip and jumped away, deciding to follow up with a kick to Sakura's head, but was blocked by the pink haired girl instead. A

series of very fast (though not as fast as Lee) punches, kicks, somersaults, uppercuts, and back flips followed the two seemingly equally skilled girls.

Frustrated at the deceptive equal strength, Ino shouted back in irritation. "Is this all you've got, SAKURA? What happened to all that strength I saw in the forest of Death? What happened to all those fancy jutsus you've used before?! What happened to them all, huh?! Are you holding back on my account?! Well DON'T! Just give me your best shot, Sakura! I dare ya!" Ino screamed as both she and Sakura hammered each other with powerful punches to their faces that threw them both back several metres.

Struggling onto a sitting position, Ino glared at Sakura's panting figure. "Why are you holding back!?" She screamed at the girl. "Are you pitying me? I don't want your pity or sympathy! Don't forget that I am STILL your rival and I WON'T lose to you!" With a determined mind, Ino raised herself onto unsteady legs, grabbing onto another kunai she pointed it at Sakura for a time but did not throw it at the girl's direction.

Their eyes met for a long silent moment until Ino finally moved. She slowly drew back the kunai and sliced off her own long hair, dumping the large amounts onto the ground. Ignoring the startled shouts originating from Shikamaru and Choji's location on the balconies, Ino glared resolutely at Sakura (who is also on her feet now). "I am a proud ninja, Sakura. I won't let you or anyone stand in the way of that. I refuse to be cheated in such a way!" She then performed a two handed seal and directed it at Sakura.

While Ino had been busy with cutting off her own hair, Sakura had quickly and silently performed a quick seal, unseen by Ino. Sakura smirked in response. "Are you that desperate to lose, Ino?" She tilted her head just so to indicate her arrogant manner. "The Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind body switch) is a very slow jutsu. Do you really think you can catch me with it?"

Ino narrowed her eyes and gave a thin smile instead. "We won't know until we try."

Sakura shrugged and simply stood there, waiting for Ino. Ino took her time but soon activated her family's secret techniques. "Shintenshin no Jutsu!" she shouted and straight away, her body slumped forward onto the ground. Sakura simply stood exactly where she was as if nothing had happened.

Above them, on the balconies, Lee looked anxiously at his sensei. "Gai sensei. Will Sakura-san be okay? Why didn't she run?"

Gai narrowed his eyes and smiled in response. "Lee. Look closely at Sakura." He answered. And Lee did so but still didn't understand why his sensei didn't just answer his questions.

On the battle arena, Sakura started chuckling. "Ino... a person should always keep their trump card until the last moment before they use it. I thought you knew that." (1)

A light laugh came from the slumped form of Ino. "Of course I did." She raised her head and looked directly at Sakura with a wide smirk on her face. "Now you can't escape!" She then revealed that she had used her long strands of hair to create a type of lasso around Sakura's feet. Channelling chakra through the strings, Ino was able to render Sakura immobile. "I guess this is the end for you Sakura-chan. Too bad you made the bad decision of not beating me up when you had the chance."

With her foot directly pressing on the chakra enhanced hair strands, Ino re-did her previous seal but just before she was able to complete her jutsu, a soft voice spoke to her from behind. "Gomen ne. Ino-chan. I just didn't want to hurt you too much." Suddenly, the Sakura standing in front of her, trapped by her hair, disappeared into a cloud of smoke. BUNSHIN???was Ino's last thought as the real Sakura performed her own jutsu behind Ino.

"Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu!" (Forced Sleep no Jutsu), as Sakura lightly tap Ino on her shoulder. Ino's body instantly slumped forward in forced sleep, but before she could collapse completely onto the floor, Sakura had caught her and held her close. Hayate, watching the unconscious form of Ino, declared Sakura to be the victor of this match.

When the medic nins tried to take a look at Ino, Sakura just shook her head and told them that Ino will be awake within half an hour, she didn't use that much Chakra in the attack anyway. With the explanations done, Sakura and Haku both carried Ino's sleeping form onto the balconies again where Asuma, Shikamaru and Choji fussed about the unconscious girl.

Kakashi smiled at Sakura from behind his mask. "Well done. Sakura. I'm proud of you." Lee was beside her giving tons of encouragement and praise as well. Sakura only gave a small smile in reply but her eyes never left Ino. That is, until she felt a hand on her shoulder in support, she looked over at Naruto and he smiled back at her. With a nod as his only encouragement, he took his hand away and returned to watch the next fight, this one between Tenten and Temari.

Tenten and Temari stood opposite one another on the battle arena waiting for each other to start the assault. Suspicious of her opponent's nonchalant expression, Tenten was the first to react, jumping backwards some distance away to avoid any sneak attacks.

She stayed her distance away for a time before finally jumping high into the air; Tenten reached behind into her pouch and produced several shurikens to be thrown towards Temari. Temari only smirked in response. Within a split second, Temari had rendered all of Tenten's shurikens useless, lying on the floor.

Tenten stared in disbelief. There's no way I missed! What did she do to dodge or block my attack? The slightly panicked girl though to herself. Taking a couple of deep breaths, Tenten calmed herself

down and reached behind into her pouch again, this time, she produced a scroll instead.

On the balcony above, Shikamaru simply looked at both fighters with a wary eye and sighed. "How unsightly... Sand wins again." Naruto took a short glance at him but didn't comment.

Back on the arena floor, Tenten, not to be undone by her adversary's confident attitude simply tried again. She ran around Temari for a time until she found an opportune instant to begin her attack. Jumping high into the air again, she spun the now opened scroll diagonally, across, up and over, twisting and turning in mid air until the scroll gracefully twirled around her spinning form. Then came the summoned weapons. Tenten truly was a weapon's specialist as she rained down a multitude of weapons directly at her challenger.

However, to Tenten's surprise, Temari merely smiled again and released the large fan from her back, opening it slightly to reveal one large purple circle. With one swipe of the fan, all of Tenten's weapons were thrown off target.

"Heh. Heh. This is the first star. If you see all three stars, you'll lose." Temari taunted.

Tenten gritted her teeth in anger, landing lightly on her feet. Fine! If long distance attacks won't work, then I guess I'll just have to use near range combat and surprise her! After all, I don't think that Sand girl is good at near range combat either. Gripping two kunais in both hands tightly, Tenten charged her opponent.

Temari closed her fan and prepared herself for the onslaught of weapons but Tenten surprised her slightly by jumping over her instead. Landing directly behind the Sand Nin, Tenten thrust the kunai within her right hand forward only to be blocked by Temari's fan as she twisted around just in time to prevent the attack. Raising her left foot to kick the fan away, Tenten thrust forward with her left kunai this time. Using the momentum from the kick, Temari turned in a complete circle and rotated her fan around to block Tenten's other

kunai then shifted slightly to jab the other end of the fan into Tenten's unprotected ribs.

Forced backwards from the unexpected blow to her ribs, Tenten took a step back in pain and Temari took the opportunity and swung her still closed fan in an arc which slammed heavily against Tenten's torso. Tenten gasped in pain as she was sent flying sideways away from Temari and her fan. Sliding on the ground until she came to a stop, Tenten struggled back onto her feet, grabbing onto her throbbing side, while trying to clear her head of the pain as well as the furious cheering by both Lee and Gai.

Breathing heavily from her fight, Tenten decided that it was probably safer for her if she stayed with long range attacks. Damn it! Looks like I can't hold anything back! After a few moments of debating, Tenten ignored her pain and smiled. She reached back confidently into her pouch once again and withdrew two scrolls this time. Placing them on the ground besides her, she started to perform seals and ignored the Sand Nin's taunts. Finishing her final seal, Tenten looked determinately at her adversary and shouted: "Soushouryu!" (Rising Twin Dragons)

A loud boom echoed through out the battle arena as thick smoke covered everything within sight. A second later, two long, thin and graceful white dragons emerged from the smoke cloud and flew directly upwards. Finally stopping in mid air, the dragons seem to twist and twirl around themselves, creating a perfect ribbon of movement. At last, Tenten revealed herself, jumping from the smoke and stopping in between the two long scrolls that now took over the forms of the heavenly dragons.

Once again, Tenten twisted and turned in mid air, summoning forth hundreds of weapons and directed them all at Temari. Temari simply raised her fan, opened it until the second star was revealed and twisted herself in a full circle, creating winds so strong that it blew away all of Tenten's weapons as well as Tenten herself.

Avoiding all of her own weapons, Tenten landed hard onto the floor but still on her feet. "I'M NOT FINISHED YET!" She yelled as she launched herself into the air again. Tenten raised both her hands and small, slightly invisible strings can be seen attached to each of her fingers leading to all of the weapons. Flapping her arms together like wings, Tenten was able to lift up all of her weapons and launch them again at Temari.

This time however, Temari was not in the mood to play around, she opened her fan all the way and with one mighty sweep, Tenten and her weapons were flung away once again by the large wind force. Surprised by the hurricane like winds, Tenten did not manage to land softly onto the floor this time. Sliding on her back for several metres from her landing spot, she struggled into a sitting position, gasping for breath. Not finished with her performance, Temari then spun her fan in her hand for a moment until she seemingly disappeared. Tenten's eyes widened at the illusion.

A voice from above brought Tenten's mouth shut as she looked up to find a flying Temari, sitting firmly on her fan as she glided across the room. Landing in front of the stunned Leaf Genin, Temari prepared her fan for her final attack. "Ninpou: Kamaitachi!" (Ninjutsu: Whirlwind attack) (2) She yelled as she swung her fan back and forth.

All of a sudden, some kind of horizontal twister appeared, originating from Temari's fan. The powerful wind force swept Tenten off her feet and pushed her upward into the twisting air of a small tornado. Within the miniature tornado, Tenten grunted in pain as she suffered hundreds of small cuts to her body from the invisible blades made from the sharp winds. Finally, the attack slowed and Tenten was left falling fast onto the ground, where she landed directly onto Temari's fan in a brutally painful fashion.

Naruto closed his eyes as the only sign of his disappointment and pity at the poor girl's lost, but he also realised long ago that the Sand Nin had always been out of the Leaf nin's league. When he opened his eyes again, it was only to see Gai's challenge to the remaining

Sand Nin that Lee was strong. Sighing at the unfolding drama, he looked at the electronic board instead, hoping that he would NOT be next. He really REALLY didn't want to see his Aunt anytime soon.

As the names scrolled on and finally slowing down to a stop, Naruto gave a sigh of relief that it wasn't his name being displayed. However, the fight was incredibly short for his liking. Naruto's eyebrow twitched. That Sound girl is pathetic... no wonder Sakura said she could handle her easily, it was the other Sound Nins that plagued Sakura during my time of unconsciousness.

His eyebrow twitched again as he realised his name was being displayed on the Electronic board this time, his opponent was none other than Inuzuka Kiba. He sighed and started walking towards the stairs, both Kibi and Kirin trailing behind him like faithful pets and he vaguely heard Sakura giving him a cheer of support.

Both boys stood upon the arena facing each other, one with a smirk on his face hiding his inner nervousness, the other completely expressionless. Above them, on the balconies stood a group of spectators whom all have their own beliefs and ideas about the participants.

Hinata fidgeted constantly as she debated whom she should root for. I'm Kiba-kun's teammate so I should encourage him... but... at the same time... I don't want Naruto-kun to lose... Oh what should I do? If I do cheer for Naruto-kun, then Kiba-kun might get mad... oh...

Neji narrowed his eyes in contemplation. Naruto would win. At least, that's what I think. He's complacent and calm, while the other one seems to be a bit nervous and yet excited by the prospects of this fight. Hn. Show me what you got, Uzumaki Naruto.

Lee turned to Sakura for a moment. "Sakura-san. Is... um... that is... Is Naruto-kun's back healed yet?" From what I remembered of his back, man... I'm surprised he can even stand straight! I hope he's okay."

Sakura gave him a tight smile but did not switch her gaze from her teammate. "He should be fine. His back is almost completely healed but he won't be able to do any sudden movements unless he wants to sprain a muscle or something." Though her outside façade was calm, her inner struggles remain. Inner Sakura shouted at the top of her lungs: GO!!! NARUTO!!! GO!!! SHOW THE WORLD WHAT YOU'VE GOT!!! KICK HIS ASS!!!! Normal Sakura however contemplated how calm Naruto looked. I hope he's gonna be alright..

Kakashi stood proudly behind his pink haired student. I wonder what you'll show me this time, Naruto. You've always been the most surprising of all three of you. I wonder... will you show me your true strength here?

The third Hokage watched on with a blank expression on his face, hiding his inner interest. I have heard from Kakashi that Naruto was pretty good, as to be expected from Jiraiya's training. However, I've never really seen the boy fight. This will truly be an interesting battle.

Ino (who was finally awake after Tenten and Temari's fight) looked over at the two participants with confusion in her eyes. "Hey, Shikamaru! Who do you think is gonna win? I mean, I know that Naruto had some special training before but would it be enough for him to beat Kiba. Kiba has always been kinda strong, you know."

Shikamaru shrugged in response. "Who knows?" But a vague glint of interest was shining in his eyes. Let's see what a student of the Legendary San Nin can do.

Kuranai stood hesitantly behind the railing as she watched her student from above. I don't know whether or not Kiba can handle this one. Uzumaki Naruto... I've heard rumours about the Nine-tails carrier, but they're just that, rumours. I can't predict the outcome of this fight, but at least, I know I've trained Kiba well enough to handle himself in most situations. I just hope he'd be able to pull himself out of this one on his own.

Azuma blew a small puff of smoke from his lips in a nonchalant fashion, however, his eyes never left the combatants now present on the stage. Hm... Uzumaki Naruto huh? I wonder what the kid would show us in this fight..

"Heh heh! Let's see what you've got, oh great Uzumaki Naruto..." Kiba taunted. "I'll give you one strike to prove your worth for this fight! I'll tell you now, I'm not holding back at all, you hear?!" He shouted back, sarcasm literary dripping from his words. But mentally, he gripped his resolve resolutely. If what that Kabuto guy said was true, then Naruto have been that Jiraiya's student for a long time now. Damn! If he's strong then I won't have a bloody chance in hell!

Without waiting for a reply, Kiba dropped down onto one of his knees and performed a quick seal. "Gijyuu Ninpou: Shikyaku no Jutsu" (Beast Mimicry Ninja Technique: Four Legs) (3). Chakra surged all over Kiba's body as he crouched down on all fours, readied himself and then charged at Naruto, leaving his faithful dog, Akamaru, behind. Almost faster than the eye could see, Naruto was forcefully elbowed by Kiba and thrown backwards until he slammed into the concrete walls behind him and landed heavily on the ground below. Kibi and Kirin growled hatefully at Kiba but quickly moved towards their downed master, whining softly trying to get him back up to his feet.

Kiba blinked in surprise. Was that it? Is that all the guy had? Then his stunned face turned into a smirk of triumph. "Heh. That was easier than I thought! Yo! Referee! Looks like I won this match huh?" he turned his back to his opponent as he made his way towards the stairs, knowing that each and every pair of eyes in the room was directed at him, instead of his useless adversary. That is, until a soft but calm voice stilled his movements.

"Never turn your back towards your enemy. You may not live to regret that action."

Kiba spun around instantly and had to cover his shock as he watched Naruto slowly stood up on unsteady legs, head bowed slightly with blood running down his forehead and mouth. But the boy's voice was calm, almost as if he expected the attack and took it willingly. Kiba growled; he hated people who were so arrogant about their abilities, ignoring the fact that he too, also fell into such a category.

"Is that all you can say? Ha! You're the one barely standing and bleeding all over the floor! Don't try to act so superior as if you're the king of the mountain when you're NOTHING but an ant yourself!" He yelled at the blond boy angrily. Without looking back, he shouted for his companion. "Let's go! Akamaru!"

Throwing two smoke bombs at Naruto, Kiba and Akamaru rushed into the fray of purple smoke, completely obscuring all the audience's view of the fight. Shouts of surprise and pain, kicks and punches could be heard from the origin of the smoke but no one could see exactly what was going on in there at all.

Finally, Kiba jumped out of the smoke and landed lightly on his feet. He smiled and called out to his dog. "Oi Akamaru! Let's finish this!" But to his surprise, his dog didn't come out immediately when he called. The smoke slowly cleared away to reveal what was hidden behind it and Kiba growled low in his voice at the sight he met. Akamaru was held down firmly by Naruto's own two foxes – one had its teeth firmly on Akamaru's neck forcing the small white dog to stay down, whimpering at the pain, and the other had its claws dug firmly onto Akamaru's back, rendering it immobile. Naruto sat some ways away, seemingly more bruised than he had been previously but still showing an expressionless face.

Finally, Naruto spoke again. "Never underestimate your enemies. You should know better than to forget how many opponents you actually have within any given fight."

Kiba snarled at him again. "Damn it! Shut the F==K UP!" He silently flipped a black soldier pill from his fingers towards Akamaru. His

loyal dog manoeuvred around the foxes' grip just enough to catch and swallow the soldier pill. Instantly, Akamaru's fur turned bright red in colour and started spiking out a bit more. With the boosted strength and energy, Akamaru kicked away from the foxes, snarled back at them and returned quickly to his master's side. Kibi and Kirin, too, ran back returned to their master's side, doing their best to protect him.

Taking a soldier pill himself, Kiba quickly called forth Akamaru to jump on his back. Once ready, he quickly performed another seal. "Gijyuu Ninpou: Jyuujin Bunshin!" (Beast Mimicry Ninja Technique: Half-Beast Clone). When the seal was completed, Akamaru disappeared into a cloud of smoke and when the smoke once again cleared, all it revealed behind it was an exact replica of Kiba himself, standing on top of the original Kiba.

"Now it's two against one. Let's see what you can do now!" Both Kibas shouted at the same time.

Naruto merely blinked at the sight before him, but then shifted his gaze away from the two boys in front of him towards his own errant sensei on the other side of the room. Jiraiya gave him a tight nod, giving him permission to use this special move. Naruto smiled in relief at his reply.

Damn! I was almost dog-food before. If it weren't for Kibi and Kirin blocking most of the punches and kicks, I would have been down ages ago. Thank the gods they're with me now! Struggling onto his knees, he patted the ground gently and Kibi and Kirin immediately stood still before him. I have to use this technique. Even though it's a bit unfair for Kiba, but right now, right here, I'm at a disadvantage... And I'll admit it... I'm also desperate.

Truthfully, even with the added healing and Chakra from Kyuubi, Naruto still wasn't at his fullest potential. That's the problem with using any of the Tenkun no bukis, they draw out so much Chakra and their damage to the user are sometimes so great and severe that even the great Kyuubi finds it difficult to help out sometimes.

Especially the Kakuhouou no Hane, since it consumes the user's flesh more than any of the other Tenkun no bukis. And since it was his flesh that was hurting, he was unable to react as quickly as he would have had and therefore ended up with a lot more bruises and cuts than he was use to. If it were any other wound or injury caused by any of the normal ninja weapons, than it would be easy to heal using Kyuubi's Chakra, but the Tenkun no buki's damage is very different. These so called weapons have a mind of their own - living entities trapped within solid weapons and if given the chance, they would devourer their user whole without remorse and even the Kyuubi couldn't heal his soul.

"Kiba-kun" Naruto addressed his opponent directly while secretly performing seals, hoping to draw out the fight a bit longer so to give himself some time to complete this technique. "Let me show you a technique that only three other people in the entire world have ever seen me do. This is something I have never shown anyone outside of those chosen three. You should feel privileged of being the first to face this technique in actual combat." Naruto said calmly while Kiba watched on with slight curiosity, wondering whether Naruto was bluffing or not.

Once he had finished his seal, Naruto wiped his right hand across his face, swiping away some of the blood and placed said hand on top of Kibi's head and spoke in a soft voice. "Fuuin Kai: Kyuubi Bubun!" (Seal Release: Partial Nine-Tails!) (4) Suddenly, a huge surge of Chakra was realised from Naruto's palm and surrounded the small form of Kibi, rotating and twisting around the fox like a miniature tornado. The Chakra swirled around so dangerously fast and Naruto quickly removed his hand before the Chakra burnt it.

After an instant of shock (having just released a large amount of Chakra – even though it wasn't exactly *his* Chakra), Naruto shouted more loudly into the room. "Reveal thy true form! Kibi Kitsune!" And immediately, the small form of the fox changed dramatically. It grew larger in size (more than one metre in length – tails not counted); its fur turned a slight reddish tint and from its back stretched five fluffy,

large tails instead of just one. Each tail had its tips glowing a fiery red colour, as well as Kibi's short yet spiked up ears. Finally, when the transformation was completed, Kibi growled dangerously at the two stunned boys in front of them.

"Master, let me fight them. Please rest and reserve your strength." A low, angry voice echoed through out the room as all the audiences' (including Kiba) eyes widen in shock. After all, it isn't everyday you meet a talking fox.

"Take it easy on him, Kibi. I don't wish to have any casualties in this fight." Naruto said softly behind his determined pet fox. And Kibi, in turn, nodded in acknowledgement. Naruto turned back to the two Kibas'. "Kiba-kun. Let me introduce you to Kibi Kitsune. He is very similar to one of those summoned animals from the Kuchiyose no Jutsu, but slightly different. Do not underestimate him!"

To be continued.

(1) Yeah... I know that Shino's suppose to be the one that says this, but this is an AU, so just deal!

(2) There are several definitions/translations for this attack. Inane started off calling it the "Whirlwind attack", then changed to something like "Cyclone attack", and in the anime (well, the one I have), it's called "Blade of Wind attack" or something like that. So please be aware that all of these different names mean the SAME TECHNIQUE!!

(3) Uh... I got this translation from the anime, so I'm not sure whether it's right or not.

(4) Original technique. More information from the Jutus/OC list from before.

I know... I know... EVIL CLIFF HANGER!!! I'll die by the end of the day. I'm sure.

Gomen... I've been lazy... Or you could say, I've been putting it off and working on my uni stuff more. nn; Gomen. I'm sorry for making you all wait. Please don't kill me. Uh... Hopefully the next chapter will be out soon... hopefully... Keep up the reviews... z Z Z

Chapter 12

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Naruto Vs Kiba.
Chapter Ten: Prelims Part 2

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

Inu-chan613, Silverknight7, xero-ghost, Ookima, Josh Summers, Akito, Anonymous, Wormkaizer, Anon, dalcacris, refused, stoictimer, Joseph Brenninkmeijer no Jutsu, Anzkendoboy: Thank you all so very much for putting up with me. Please keep on encouraging me, I really appreciate all the support.

No one: As for Naruto's future and Naruto's past, it'll come once my OC actually shows up. ;; I know, I hate the wait as well, but if I'm gonna do this story justice, I have to take it slow. And as for Itachi and Akatsuki, yeah, they already know all about Naruto's travels and they do want Naruto, but since they've discovered that he was related to ruling Uzumaki family of the Hidden Air village, they have become very cautious about how they kidnap him, and they certainly won't do anything with Ruri coming to visit Konoha.

Hitomi no Ryu: I'll stick with the 'kit' from now on, k? Actually, I don't know of any demon cat that can control Gravity and Magnetism -the Gravity bit was inspired by watching Tokyo Underground and the Magnetism from X-men 's Magneto. I really have no idea what character you're referring to, but which ever one it is, I hope it doesn't have the abilities that Kirin has. Um.. sorry about the email

thing, it's "shellaiinet.net.au", just don't spread it around, I've got enough junk mail to last me a lifetime. ;;

Jade Dragon1: Thanks for picking up that mistake; I guess I've just forgotten about it or something. Anyway, I'll try to fix it up next time. Thanks again.

Mizuki the Hokage: Would you like to become one of my pre-readers? With all these people hounding for more updates, I don't have anytime to go over the old chapters. Gomen, I know that a lot of them have mistakes everywhere (either spelling, grammar, or even plot deviations from the original), but for the most part, I leave it as it is to show myself that I am continually improving my standards instead of just relying on pre-readers to pick up all the problems for me. Okay, here are some answers to your questions;- the memory of Naruto when he was six doesn't have to be from children, some of the Chuunin teachers could well remember him, but I won't go into detail about such a minor discrepancy. In this AU, since Konohamaru figured Naruto should apologies to him (through no fault of his own), he used his position as the Hokage's grandson to get what he wants. He may have wanted to be acknowledged as 'Konohamaru', but that doesn't mean a spoilt brat like him won't use his position to his advantage to get what he wants. I'm not sure whether the Konohamaru corps was formed before or after Naruto taught him the sexy no jutsu, since it was never confirmed; and anyway, in this AU, Naruto taught him the jutsus after he returned to Konoha from the Wave country, so the Konohamaru corps would have already formed. Konohamaru wanted to learn from Naruto because due to inside information (he could probably badger the administrators), he learnt that Naruto is the student of Jiraiya, and Jiraiya could very well defeat the Hokage, therefore he followed him. When Naruto performed the electrified water blast, he directed it in such a way that it was only aimed at the mirrors and would have only surrounded Sasuke to keep him safe, then it ebbed away. Haku ignored the Ginshi no Himo, because he had never seen that type of weapon before and so, instead of waiting for Naruto to attack with it, he decided that he should launch the next attack and see what Naruto

does, it's a type of battle strategy. Okay, it'd be kind of rude but what I meant to say was Zabuza kinda ordered Haku to live and try to find happiness. Since he couldn't return to the mist anyway, Haku saw Kakashi's offer like a lifeline of hope for something better, he just needed something to hold onto since he just had his whole world collapse around him with Zabuza's death. It was during the journey back that Naruto and Haku became friends, he didn't just choose to have Naruto suddenly become the centre of his world. They had similar traumatic pasts, and Naruto found an opportunity in Haku that he hadn't had since Ellie's death, another person who may understand him, which was why they became so close in the first place. Finally, as for the Mist ninjas hunting Haku down in Konoha, after joining Konoha, the third Hokage helped Haku negotiate a sort of treaty between Leaf and mist, as long as Haku remains strictly a Medic Ninja and does not participate in any battles, he gets to stay in the leaf in relative peace. I hope that answered all your questions.

Sojoun: As I said before, Sasuke is a very proud and stubborn ninja so he wouldn't let any of the other Medic nins near him. As for Kakashi, they aren't allowed into the Chuunin Exam Tower until after the 5 days limit, or at least, that's what happened in this particular story anyway.

Kadashi the wondering reviewer: Thanks for the compliments and the help. Actually, I think I've got most of my major plot developments figured out, it's just the day-to-day happenings of each chapter that's annoying me, especially the fight scenes. I'm constantly trying to come up with genuinely interesting fights that are original and entertaining, it's damn difficult I tell ya. As for the romance, well, I will definitely need help with that but it won't come about until much later in the story. I'm currently concentrating on making each character stronger, rather than give them a sexual or romantic boost. I really should change my summary into 'eventually HinataXNaruto'! ;; Gomen but thanks for reviewing.

SJ: Thank you sooo much for your continual support. As for your question - 'his errant (though no longer official) sensei' basically

means that though Jiraiya is still Naruto's sensei in principle (as in he still teaches him), but since their return to Konoha, officially (written on paper) Kakashi is now Naruto's sensei even if he doesn't teach him much, and the 'errant' is because Jiraiya seem to be taking it as a holiday, spending his days peeking at girls and continuing with his books so he doesn't spend as much time with Naruto as before.

Insanity: Actually, I've never thought about giving Kiba claws before.. hm.. it certainly has potential. Thanks for that, I'll definitely keep it in mind. For some reason, there are a lot of 'inner' personalities in many of my characters – Naruto, and now Hinata too. I hope none of you get sick of seeing strange double personality disorders for most of these main characters. It would be easy to use Naruto's past against him if he were alone. However, for the next few chapters, he's not alone, my OCs will be there, so there won't be much manipulation because the OCs are very powerful and in this case, all knowing. (I just know people will start calling them Mary-sues.. oh well). Perhaps after the Chuunin Exams, Kabuto will definitely have a field day if he knew of Naruto's past. Hinata's infatuation didn't start off like that, it began with respect, turn to admiration, and then started changing, it'll be explained later in this chapter. I hope it captures Hinata's confusion well enough, I really think Hinata is the kind of girl where her passions run away without her knowledge or control. As for Kibi and Kirin, I don't think their tails have anything to do with the Kyuubi's original tails, because I don't even know what are the Kyuubi's tail's original attacks. The number of tails simply coincide with the number of elements each have, it's because the Kyuubi's chakra are held within the tails and each tail has a unique ability, which is why Kibi and Kirin doesn't need hand seals. Sound is vibration, but it is also part of the airwaves (ie. Wind or electromagnetic pulses) so I just put it as an element in itself. Wow! Your jutsus are becoming more and more ingenious! I've got the same idea for the 'Call from the past' jutsu because I've got another OC planned in the future who is a necromancer, and the 'empathy' one is certainly something to think about. OO;; Hey, maybe I can use some of these for the other characters. Thanks a bunch!!

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. Some of you will probably be argumentative about the shifts in moods within Naruto and Hinata's personality in this chapter. My only reply is that all these changes are deliberate. So don't complain please. I don't want to hear it. Anything else, I'm all ears.

...means "thoughts"

==== means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 11

Previously in the last chapter

Naruto shouted more loudly into the room. "Reveal thy true form! Kibi Kitsune!" And immediately, the small form of the fox changed dramatically. It grew larger in size (more than one metre in length – tails not counted); its fur turned a slight reddish tint and from its back stretched five fluffy, large tails instead of just one. Each tail had its tips glowing a fiery red colour, as well as Kibi's short yet spiked up ears. Finally, when the transformation was completed, Kibi growled dangerously at the two stunned boys in front of them.

"Master, let me fight them. Please rest and reserve your strength." A low, angry voice echoed through out the room as all the audiences' (including Kiba) eyes widen in shock. After all, it isn't everyday you meet a talking fox.

"Take it easy on him, Kibi. I don't wish to have any casualties in this fight." Naruto said softly behind his determined pet fox. And Kibi, in turn, nodded in acknowledgement. Naruto turned back to the two Kibas'. "Kiba-kun. Let me introduce you to Kibi Kitsune. He is very similar to one of those summoned animals from the Kuchiyose no Jutsu, but slightly different. Do not underestimate him!"

===== **ALL NEW.**

The Kibas' blinked back their astonishment as they both gulped in nervousness at having to face this strange and powerful foe, both could feel the large amount of Chakra still swirling around the fox as if it were a living entity in its own right. Naruto, seeing that both of them were still bewildered, continued with his explanations. "Kibi has five tails instead of one, enabling him to control a total of five different elements at any one time. If you wish to surrender, now is your chance."

Hearing the word 'surrender', both Kibas snapped out of their stunned reverie and snarled at the fox. "Come on Akamaru! We can do this!" One of the Kibas exclaimed and the other growled in response. Instantly, both Kibas launched themselves onto both sides of the room with lightning quick reflexes. Jumping onto the walls on both sides of Kibi, they ran across it as if they defied gravity. Reaching the appropriate location, they both jumped off the walls at exactly the same time, aiming directly at the still snarling fox.

"Kibi! Kazedan! (Wind bullets) (1)" Naruto directed from behind the tense fox. Immediately, the five tailed fox looked up at one of the Kibas (the one on its left) and sucked in some air. Opening his mouth, Kibi revealed a basketball-sized air bomb and

blasted it toward Kiba.

Since he was moving at such a high speed towards the wind attack, Kiba (the one the attack was aimed at) didn't have enough time to dodge. Taking the blast head on, he protecting himself by clamping both his arms across his chest. Upon impact, Kiba was slammed back onto the same wall he had just jumped from. Sliding onto the ground, the viewing audiences could see a large dent almost five inches deep into the metal walls where Kiba had been slammed.

Having dealt with one of the opponents for now, Kibi quickly jumped up and over the other boy whom just barely missed the fox with a swipe of his own newly formed claws. Landing lightly on its hind legs,

Kibi launched another Kazedan at the second Kiba. But this Kiba managed to dodge the blow which continued on its one-way path directly towards Naruto and Kirin.

The Kiba that had been slammed into the wall sat up after catching his breath, and watched in satisfaction as Naruto was knocked to one side by his own fox (Kirin), just barely dodging his other fox's attack. Heh! Having your own attack flung at ya, eh? He smirked as he saw he could use this opportunity to his own advantage, since Naruto seemed to have been interrupted half way through performing a seal and had to restart it again. Flicking his eyes towards his other self (Akamaru) and sending a silent message about the next plan of attack, both boys launched into their next assault while Kibi was still distracted, howling in regret at almost hitting his own master with its' jutsu blast.

Kiba threw two smoke bombs at Kibi, rendering the fox unable to see for the time being. But it won't last damn it! The stupid fox can use Wind attacks! That's one of the five elements that Naruto said it could use! Shit! There's still four more trump cards held in that seemingly deceptive body! Growling at the unfairness of fighting such a strong opponent, Kiba used his anger as fuel for his next assault.

Running at top speed, Kiba shouted towards Akamaru. "Let's do this! GATSUUGA!! (Piercing Fang)" Twisting their bodies forward in a circular motion, both Kibas had transformed themselves into powerful human drills, with sharp claws that could slice their way through most surfaces, heading towards Kibi who was still obscured by the cloud of smoke. For the next few seconds, no one could tell what was happening within the area covered by the smoke, other than the sounds of animals snarling, biting, scratching and clawing.

Naruto was still kneeling on the floor where he had been knocked down by Kirin. He bit his lips in nervousness and wondered if Kibi was hurt by Kiba's attacks. However, he soon pushed his worries aside for the moment and concentrated on finishing the seal he had begun to perform before but was interrupted. Concentrating hard on the intricate hand gestures, Naruto didn't look up to watch the

upcoming battle, if he did, he would see that both Kibas had launched themselves out of the smoke, continuing to perform their Gatsuuga (Piercing fang) and was heading straight for Kirin and him.

Finally looking up and seeing the incoming attack, Naruto quickly completed his unfinished seal, slapping his still bloodstained palm onto the head of his other fox. He quickly summoned forth Kyuubi's Chakra, enabling it to fuse with its other partial entity, Kirin, using Naruto's own body as a channel.

Naruto gritted his teeth as pain laced through his arm for a second time that same day, due to channelling such large amounts of Chakra at any one time. If I thought commanding the Rasengan was painful. This type of summoning is about five times worse! I hope I don't burn the chakra pathways in my arm and hands too much, I still need to use them later.

Watching through half lidded eyes due to pain, Naruto watched in horror as he realise that he was too slow in completing his summoning and was going to pay for underestimating his opponent.

Shutting his eyes tightly and bracing himself for the onslaught, Naruto suddenly heard a loud 'BANG' followed by a series of curses and pained growls. He peaked his eyes open just enough to see both Kibas lying on the floor directly in front of him, both holding onto one of their arms as if in pain. Naruto gasped as he saw a barely visible, violet spherical barrier surrounding him. He looked up and around, blinking at the large fox standing over him in a protective stance and snarling ferociously at the two Kibas.

At the same time, Kibi had just successfully blown away the smoke emanating from the smoke bomb by using another wind-based jutsu to redirect the smoke. Being preoccupied with avoiding Kiba's violent claws, Kibi had become too distracted by the smoke and the anticipation of the next attack that it didn't even notice when the Kibas' had launched against its master instead. Realising that his master needed rescuing, he cleared up the smoke and was rather

surprised at finding his counterpart, Kirin, standing tall, though slightly hunched over, defending their master from harm.

Breathing in heavily at the exertion and loss of Chakra within his own body, Naruto looked at his trembling and burnt right hand. Damn! I'll have to bandage that and not be able to use it all day! Looking back at the enormous Kirin, Naruto struggled to stand on weakened legs, grabbing onto Kirin's fur for leverage and dragging himself up. He then took some time to analyse both of his pet foxes.

It was true what he told Kiba, he had never used both Kibi and Kirin's battle forms in a real fight before. He had trained to summon them, yes, but never actually use them in a genuine fight and had little to no knowledge about the extent of their true powers.

Kibi had five tails he knew that, indicating that the fox could command five different elements: air, water, fire, lightning, and sound. Though small in size, Kibi was incredibly fast and agile, often preferring to take on an offensive position.

Kirin on the other hand, was almost Kibi's complete opposite. Kirin's true form was very large, almost two metres tall and three metres in length (tails not counted). She (Kirin is a girl) had sprouted two tails instead of one. Her dark brown fur had also turned a slightly reddish tint, due to the influences of Kyuubi's Chakra, and her two tails both bore tiger-like strips across them. She always had a very protective personality and she was often seen standing physically close to him. In this sense, she was primarily a defensive fighter, complementing Kibi's offensive attitude. This was why both of her powers were usually used as barriers or shields. However, other than that and some of the basic jutsus he had taught them, Naruto really didn't know how much of a trump card he had with them by his side.

Ignoring the desire to analyse his pets for the time being, Naruto returned his concentration to his adversaries, who were currently arguing with the referee about the fairness of having three against two, and the use of summoned animals in such a fight.

"Hey! He can't possibly use those two foxes, can he?! It's unfair to have so many creatures helping him. Not to mention, he hasn't lifted a single finger in this fight at all!!" Kiba yelled at the referee, displaying his anger and frustration.

Hayate coughed sickly in response. "Actually, you're allowed to call forth as many animals as you want in a fight. Take the Aburame fight for example, he summoned thousands of bugs to assist him and Naruto only used two foxes. It is not against the rules to use more than one animal. They are all considered Ninja tools."

Kiba growled low, his fist shaking in suppressed anger. "Then what about the fact that these two SUMMONINGS are too strong! Isn't there any rule against THAT!! It's not fair to the rest of us NORMAL Genins to have to fight something like that! These creatures have more charka than I do!!"

Hayate continued to cough as he slowly spurted out his comments. "On the contrary..." He paused and coughed. "Summoned animals are also considered Ninja tools, and therefore there is no difference between comparing them to let's say..." Pausing once again, Hayate let out a series of coughs before continuing with his explanation. "... a well honed sword. If the user possesses such a sword then it is to the user's benefits. In a real battle, the opponent cannot say that just because his adversary has a good sword, that the fight wasn't fair. It's just not done. So..." Coughing one last time for emphasis, Hayate finally concluded his long speech. "In this sense, Naruto is allowed his two foxes, just as anyone is allowed to use their most secretive and powerful ninja tools."

Kiba's eyebrows twitched irritably. "But HE'S NOT FIGHTING!! HE'S JUST STANDING THERE WAITING FOR HIS PETS TO FINISH ME OFF!!" He screamed in retaliation.

Hayate looked at the growling boy with mild irritation at being forced to reply for a third time during this one fight. "This preliminary battle is to test the true strength of you Genins and the strength of their weapons are a mere reflection of the Shinobis power. If you are

unable to defeat his summons, then it is just the same as saying you are unable to defeat him. Wasting time complaining is not part of the training to become a true Shinobi. If you really feel you are not capable of defeating your foe, you can always resign." Hayate added crisply, showing a slight amount of his irritation.

Kiba growled softly, unsatisfied by the answer but unable to back down due to his pride. He looked at his opponent, now leaning heavily against the sides of that large fox and gulped down his nervousness. If I have to go down, then I'm going down with a BANG! He thought determinately.

Kiba readied himself in a battle stance, standing with Naruto and Kirin in front of him and an angry Kibi behind him. He flicked his gaze towards his companion for a split second and nodded in acquisition about their next plan of attack. There really isn't any other option left. I have to use it. Shoving his right hand into his pocket, Kiba took out two more black pills. He flipped one to Akamaru, who promptly swallowed it; and placed the other one in his own mouth, where he also swallowed it in one gulp. Instantly, Kiba felt a surge of Chakra rejuvenating all the sore spots on his body as well as giving him extra energy to use in his next attack.

Nodding in comprehension after swallowing the pill, Akamaru (still in Kiba's form) jumped onto the other Kiba's back while the original Kiba bent forward slightly and followed up with producing four shurikens gripped within each of his hands. I need to make this quick!

As if awaiting a hidden signal, Kiba (the original) suddenly started running forward, towards Naruto at a high speed, while his counterpart held on to his jacket, still sitting atop his body. Kiba quickly threw all of his shurikens at Naruto and then launched himself into performing new seal.

Naruto, watching the shurikens approach, instinctively called out for defence: "Kirin! Gekitai Jiki! (Repel magnetism) (2)" Instantly, the

repelling force of Kirin's power over the magnetic fields changed and started reflecting the metallic shurikens from their current trajectory, sending them back towards the still running Kibas.

Seeing that their first assault had no real impact, Akamaru quickly launched himself off Kiba's back, jumping high into the air to avoid colliding with the incoming shurikens. The original Kiba, on the other hand, had just finished performing his seals and yelled out in anticipation. "Doton: Chikahodo no Jutsu! (Earth type: Underground Pathway no Jutsu)" (3) Immediately, Kiba's body submerged into the concrete floors underneath him, enabling him to dodge his own shurikens passing over his head.

Naruto blinked at Kiba. So far, he had seen Kiba use all sorts of 'beast' type Ninjutsu but this one is a simple 'earth' type Ninjutsu that enables the user to simply travel underground. However, before he could continue contemplating why Kiba suddenly used such a normal yet predictable jutsu, his attention was brought towards Akamaru, whom had just landed on top of his and Kirin's Gravity force field.

Akamaru, having jumped from his master's shoulders into the air, started performing the Inuzuka Taijutsu move – Gatsuuga (Piercing Fang) almost immediately. While still spinning, Akamaru aimed his attack directly down towards Naruto and his huge fox.

Hearing the sound of the impact from Akamaru's seemingly determined drilling into Kirin's gravity force field, Naruto wondered nervously if the force field could hold up to the constant piercing of Akamaru's claws. Having his attentions completely focused above him, Naruto almost reacted too late to the sudden splitting of the concrete ground underneath him. Reacting instinctively, Naruto hauled himself completely on top of Kirin's back with all of his strength, to move away from whatever's underneath him.

That was when he realised that Akamaru's actions were to draw his attentions away from the real threat. Kiba had travelled underground with the Chikahodo no jutsu (Underground Pathway) until he was

stationed directly beneath Naruto, Akamaru was suppose to draw all the attention away from his master by making Naruto focus on its own attempts to breach the barrier. Once Naruto was sufficiently distracted, Kiba had launched another Gatsuuga (Piercing fang) directly upwards towards Naruto from under his feet. Being attacked from both above and below, Naruto had not realised that he and Kirin had left such an obvious opening when Kirin created the gravity force field in the first place - she had not considered being attacked from beneath.

Kirin, recognising the assault, waited for Naruto to completely settle on top of her before she quickly broke up her original gravity force field, only to conjure up a second force field to completely envelop her and Naruto in a full sphere. Changing the intense pressure of the gravity barrier into anti-gravity properties, she jumped off the ground and launched herself upwards, dodging all of Akamaru's and Kiba's claws while she hurried to take her master to a higher, safer plane and stayed floating in the air.

Having missed their perfect opportunity at beating Naruto, both Kibas landed lightly onto the ground again and glared at Naruto, sitting on top of Kirin's back, still floating easily in mid air about four metres up. Once again, considering his options, Kiba (the original) had completely forgotten about the other fox until he saw Naruto flick his gaze towards Kibi.

Seizing the opportunity at hand, Naruto yelled to Kibi from his high position. "Kibi! Hosuiho!! (Water Cannon)!" (4) Following the order, Kibi took another big breath and quickly followed up by releasing a huge blast of water. The large amount of water rapidly flooded the room, even while draining into the new hole created by Kiba in his previous attack. The force of the water rushed passed the two Kibas, washing them away and slamming them onto the walls behind them. Seeing that the two opponents were dazed by his attack, Kibi finally slowed and soon finished with his water attack.

Even though both Kibas were currently down, Naruto didn't want to take any more chances and continued with his assault, wanting to

finally end the fight. "Kibi! Follow up with a Da Rai! (Lightning Strike)" (5) This time, Kibi kept his mouth wide open as small sparks started appearing from within his throat. Soon, the tiny sparks started growing in size and power until they became full-grown, electrical spikes and lines travelling all over Kibi's body.

"Do it! NOW!" ordered Naruto from above. Straight away, Kibi released his pent up power, letting the electric spikes touch the water still present on the floor as well as all the wet surfaces within room. When the electric spikes touched the water's surface, it instantly electrified it and shocked whatever was wet and within reach.

Both Kiba and Akamaru were still within the water's reach. And so, they watched with trepidation as the electric lines rapidly travelled through the water to reach them. Upon contact, both beings screamed in pain as they felt their bodies being electrocuted from the inside out. A large explosion followed the yell as the electricity finally enveloped both beings and started blowing up the water molecules as well.

Watching warily from above Kirin's protective form, Naruto hoped he had not gone overboard with his attack. He really didn't want to hurt Kiba any more than he had to. As the smoke cleared, it revealed a very battered and unconscious Kiba lying still on the floor. Next to him laid his faithful dog. Upon seeing their lifeless forms, Naruto instantly regretted his previous actions. "Kibi! Vaporise the water in the surrounding area with the heat from your fire element." Kibi quickly followed the instructions by releasing a large amount of heat from his body; Kibi's form literally shimmered in a red hue as all the electrified water slowly but surely disappeared, vaporised into thin air. Naruto then told Kirin to put him down onto the ground, which Kirin swiftly obeyed.

The Referee, having already jumped towards a safer position on the walls when Kibi had launched his original water attack, finally returned onto the ground once all the water had gone. He looked over the comatose boy and dog with a nonchalant expression and

then announced to everyone in the room that 'Uzumaki Naruto' was the winner of this match.

Ignoring the pronouncement of his victory, Naruto hurried towards Kiba and Akamaru just as Haku appeared with the rest of the medic team to over see the boy's injuries.

"I didn't hurt him too much did I?" Naruto asked nervously, as he shifted from one foot to the other. He would have helped with the healing process as well, but currently, he was almost completely drained of Chakra from summoning forth both Kibi and Kirin.

After a short moment of checking over the boy's life signs, Haku gave him a small smile in return. "He's not that hurt. His nerves will be numb for a while though, having been electrified the way he did, but it will return to normal after a few days' rest. And other than that, there doesn't seem to be any other serious injury. He'll be fine, Naruto." Haku continued with his work by helping the other Medic Nins carry the boy onto the stretcher. Soon after, the rest of the Medic team carried the boy and dog away, leaving Haku behind to deal with the rest.

Turning towards Naruto's relief filled face, Haku's small smile stretched into a smirk. Happy and wanting to congratulate Naruto on passing the preliminary exam, Haku suddenly noticed all the dried blood crumpled all over Naruto's body, from his forehead to his arms. "Naruto?" Haku asked, concern filling his voice. "Would you like me to look over those wounds of yours? You look like hell."

Naruto chuckled in response, happy to have that fight over and done with. That is, until he started swaying on his feet. Loosing his balance, Haku was just about to come over and grab on to Naruto's swaying form when another person beat him to it. After the appearance of a sudden puff of white smoke, Jiraiya was revealed standing tall behind Naruto, with one of his hands steadying his student. "Naruto. We have to go." He declared.

Naruto grimaced and then whined in a child-like voice. "Do we have tooo?"

Jiraiya grinned an ironic smile. "I certainly don't want the Lady to be angry at me for being late, do you?"

Naruto pouted in a very cute fashion. "I don't wanna... Why should I be forced to face the Lion's den? I'm too young to die..." Naruto continued to whine.

Haku giggled at the display. "Well, anyway. Let me have a look at your injuries and I'll heal up whatever I can."

Wanting to waste as much time as possible, Naruto settled in to let Haku fix up as much of his injuries as possible. Anything was better than facing his Aunt's wrath. Unfortunately, that was when the referee stepped into their little conversation. "Uh..." Hayate coughed for attention. "If you don't mind, could you please take the healing somewhere else, either on the balconies or in the Medic wing? I have an exam to run." Hayate coughed again for emphasis.

Haku blinked at him in all innocence, wondering if he should look over the referee as well since he too, looked very sick. But he wasn't given the chance when Jiraiya grabbed onto both his and Naruto's arms, and started dragging them away, taking them up the stairs and onto the balconies above.

Stopping suddenly, both Naruto and Haku rammed into the heavy back of Jiraiya as he blinked in confusion and then his eyes widen in realisation. "Ah! Almost forgot! Naruto!" He turned towards Naruto, who was back to swaying unsteadily on his feet. "You have to release Kibi and Kirin's powers before we leave."

Naruto blinked in response. "Oh yeah." He too, had forgotten about the two foxes, which had now followed him up the stairs. Well, Kibi did, Kirin merely hovered beside him, against the balcony's ledge.

Well, it wasn't exactly his fault, Naruto was still too concerned about how he was going to survive his meeting with his Aunt, and didn't have the energy or attention span to focus on anything else.

Haku giggled again, finding the interaction between Naruto and Jiraiya to be terribly amusing. He had heard from Naruto all about his dreaded Aunt and her torture training techniques. He had also heard from Jiraiya all his complaints about her bossy attitudes and arrogant actions. He was looking forward to meeting this infamous Lady Oracle. After all, it isn't everyday you find someone whom was both respected and feared by both the perverted Sennin and his disciple.

Still complaining, Naruto finally turned his attention to Kirin. He placed his left palm on top of her head (his right one was pretty burnt and hurting) and focused on trying to will Kyuubi's Chakra back into his body. "Kyuubi Bubun Fuuin!" (Partial Kyuubi Seal) Naruto whispered harshly under his breath. Immediately, his left hand recoiled back from Kirin's now original form - a large spark of pain had surged through his left palm, burning through his arm, and across his shoulder, following the path the Kyuubi's Chakra would have followed until it finally returned to his belly button, the source of the original power. Unbeknownst to him, Naruto had unconsciously yelped out loud in pain and had instantly stepped back, away from the ledge, hitting his back on the wall behind him and then slumped onto the floor shivering.

After a short amount of time, Naruto blinked his eyes hazily, until he finally saw without any blurring on the edge of his sight. He then realised there were a lot of people surrounding him at the moment. Haku was by his side checking his life signs as if he had almost died; Kibi and Kirin were on both his sides, licking his unsteady hands in distress (Kibi was still in battle mode while Kirin was back to her normal self). Jiraiya, Hinata, Sakura and Kakashi hovered over him a short distance away. And behind them, were the curious and slightly concerned gazes of Ino, Shikamaru, Choji, Asuma, Lee, Neji, Gai, a slightly angry looking Kurenai and the now returned Tenten.

Naruto blinked again in astonishment at the worry upon all their faces and he tried his best to force away the blush that was most definitely forming on his face, but to no avail. He could distinctly feel his ears burn with all their eyes locked on him. Naruto started shifting nervously again until he remembered he hasn't finished transforming Kibi back to normal yet. Reaching his left hand out again, he was surprised when Haku grabbed onto it and locked determined eyes with his.

"No you are NOT going through that again. When you have some strength back, THEN we can work on transforming Kibi back to normal. UNTIL THEN, you STAY PUT!" Haku stated in an unwavering tone of voice, and Naruto could do nothing else but nod in acceptance. There was no way he could win against Haku when he's in his mother-hen mode.

Haku nodded, accepting his response. He then backed up and started pushing the other people away from the currently flushing boy. He knew Naruto needed some air anyway and with so many eyes on him, there was no way Naruto would feel comfortable. Finally, the only people left were Haku himself, Jiraiya, Sakura and Kakashi standing by the side.

Naruto was about to speak up when a soft, shy voice interrupted his musings. "Um... Naruto-kun..." He looked up into the timid eyes of Hyuga Hinata and was surprised to see her hold up something towards him.

Not knowing what else to say, Naruto stated blandly. "What is it?" Hinata only blushed in reply, unable to find any courage to answer that question. Silence hung awkwardly for a while until Haku stood up and took the small white bottle away from Hinata's trembling hands and looked at it more closely.

"Oh WOW!" Haku suddenly exclaimed, catching almost everyone's attention. "I've heard of these! Is this one of the Hyuga remedies for rapid healing of cuts and bruises?" Hinata nodded shyly and Haku beamed at her, making her blush even more. Haku then turned to

Naruto. "Naruto! You should thank her. It's not common for the Hyuga household to let just anyone use their secret remedies and medicines."

Naruto blinked at Haku, then looked towards the furiously blushing Hinata. He then smiled sincerely at her, not knowing he had unwittingly stopped her heart for several seconds. "Thank you, Hinata-san. I really appreciate your help." Stunned into silence for a long moment afterwards, Hinata finally but stiffly nodded in return and quickly turned her back towards him and ran away towards her other teammate and teacher.

Naruto looked at Hinata's back with total confusion in his eyes. He then turned to a laughing Haku by his side. "What I do?" If it was even possible, Haku laughed louder in return, while Sakura only rolled her eyes at the display. She, Kakashi, and Sasuke had also become close friends with the ex-missing nin. After all, they had travelled together from the Wave country. Though their bond of friendship was not as strong as that between Haku and Naruto, they all feel safe and secure around each other, implicitly trusting one another to help them when they have a problem.

Naruto was starting to feel all relaxed again, that is, until Jiraiya took this opportunity to remind him of the upcoming meeting with his Aunt. Clearing his throat to catch Naruto's attention, Jiraiya continued. "Naruto. Have you forgotten about the lady?" All colour drained away from Naruto's face as his wide eyes stared blankly at Jiraiya. Haku huffed in irritation. Damn, all that work to relax him and then, with one question, Jiraiya completely destroys the mood! He internally berated the white haired Sennin.

Sakura and Kakashi, on the other hand, had absolutely no idea what the other three were talking about and so, looked on with amusement as well as a slight curiosity in their eyes.

Looking at the pleading, wide eyes from Naruto, Jiraiya finally gave a resigned sigh. "Fine. We'll stay until the end of the Preliminary matches. After all, we still need to stay and hear about what the final

third exam would be like afterwards anyway. So you've probably got another few minutes left to live, kid."

Hearing the concession, Naruto heaved a sigh in relief and started smiling once again at having escaped his Aunt's clutches, even for a short while, it was still a small victory. He knew he was going to pay for his lateness but then again, at least he'll be able to hold on to his freedom for a little while longer yet.

A few minutes ago, Hinata bit her lip as she watched Kiba and Akamaru launched themselves at Naruto and his giant fox again, leaving the other fox distracted enough to not interfere. Kiba-kun... Naruto-kun..Her fingers twitched nervously, grasping tightly to one another and then letting go only to start the whole process again. She gazed avidly at the battle between her teammate and someone whom she admired. I don't even know why I admire Naruto-kun... it's not like we're really close or anything. Oh! We've only just met a few days ago but for some reason, I can't stop thinking about him!

Hinata shifted from one foot to the next as she watched Naruto being taken in surprise by Kiba's new assault from underneath him. Kiba used the same trick against Shino-kun and won their first battle, but Shino-kun quickly learnt of Kiba's tactic and overcame him in the second. I hope Naruto-kun won't be too injured...Hinata shook her head again. Why do I keep on thinking about him??!!She mentally wailed. I should be cheering for Kiba-kun since he's my teammate!

It was only a few minutes later that the battle was over, with Naruto the clear victor. As the unconscious forms of Kiba and Akamaru was being carried away by the medic team, Hinata caught up to them and handed them one of her herbal remedies for nerve traumas, they gracefully accepted and she looked on with an expression of sympathy on her face towards the comatose boy. Poor Kiba-kun...

Returning to her original location on the balconies above the battle arena, she was just in time to watch the backlash of pain on Naruto's face as he recoiled from un-summoning the enormous amount of

Chakra that had transformed the Kirin fox into its battle form. As she watched the proceedings and the worry over Naruto's health from the Medic ninja, Hinata felt her heart skip several beats and unconsciously, she quickly moved towards the injured boy's side, almost ramming Sakura aside in her haste.

A few more moments of fussing over the slightly moaning boy, Hinata suddenly realised that she was showing more concern about this almost stranger than her own teammate. Flustered by the realisation, Hinata quickly stepped back, away from the confusing enigma known as Uzumaki Naruto, to calm her own racing heart and try to understand her own emotions. I don't understand it. Why am I acting this way? She wailed internally.

As she pondered over her own actions, she shyly looked over at the now barely conscious blonde. I've only talked to him for a very brief moment during the first exam and all he actually said to me was just a few words of encouragement, that's all. Why do I feel this way? What is it that I am feeling anyway? She shifted nervously as she took out another white container of the same herbal remedy. I guess it's because I'm not used to having anyone encourage me, or praise me... I mean, I get praises from Kurenai-sensei, Kiba-kun, Akamaru-kun and Shino-kun whenever I train hard enough to make my own hands bleed. But sometimes... sometimes... it feels as if I don't deserve their praises because I haven't done anything to warrant them. It's as if they're only putting up with me because they have to, not because they want to... I've tried, really I have... to improve myself so that I'm not a burden on them, not such a total loser and being so useless to them all. But... it always turns out worse than before. Hinata thought to herself gloomily. I just wish... I just wish that there was someone out there that thinks I'm worthy of something, that I'm actually needed by someone, that I'm appreciated by people just because I'm me... just me..

[FLASHBACK]

Hisashi stood stiffly and watched dispassionately as Hanabi struggled onto her own shaking legs. He spoke to Kurenai without

even looking back at her. "Hyuga doesn't need her. A looser below in ability than her 5 years younger sister Hanabi... is of no use to the Hyuga family."

[END FLASHBACK]

Hinata flinched slightly at the memory. It was one of the most painful words her father had ever said to her. Well, it wasn't exactly said to her, but she overheard it none the less. And it hurt, not just the spiteful words itself, but the way her father had spoken of her as if she was a thorn in her own family. Hinata was brought out of her depressing thoughts when she realised that Naruto was now fully conscious. And so, she caught his attention and held the remedy in her hands out towards him. "Um... Naruto-kun..." Suddenly, all the words she had wanted to say was stuck within her throat as if they were jammed there, she had completely lost her nerve to say anything more.

Hinata blushed as she fought for control over her reddening ears, racing heart and trembling hands. WHAT IS WRONG WITH ME??!!She thought frantically and couldn't come up with anything to say as Naruto just stared confusedly at her and asked what it was in her hands. She just stood stiffly like a complete moron waiting for the baffled boy to make the first move, because she just couldn't bring herself to do anything more.

Thankfully, Haku came to her rescue (well, that's the name she heard Sakura call him anyway). Hinata gave a small sigh of relief as the medic nin drew Naruto's attentions away from her and onto him. She could only nod in reply to his question; her voice was still not working properly. However, the relief was short lived as the boy suddenly thanked her for her small contribution.

Feeling her face flush again at another stranger's compliment, she suddenly found her heart pause in mid beat as Naruto gave her a dazzling smile. Well, it was just a sincere smile on Naruto's part, but to Hinata, she thought the sun had just risen above a beautiful horizon and beamed its radiant light directly on her. She heard the

words faintly but somehow they seem to echo within her mind.
"Thank you, Hinata-san. I really appreciate your help."

Dazedly, Hinata felt as if she was floating on air. Mentally shaking her head to be rid of those thoughts, she realised she had to get a grip on herself and knew that all she could really do now was retreat from Naruto's presence, hide herself and try to analyse what was happening to her. She nodded to him stiffly, turned around swiftly and literally ran away to a safe distance, before stopping to analyse her feelings for a certain blonde boy without the boy knowing how he had affected her.

Hinata thought frantically to herself about how Naruto can affect her so much even though they are almost complete strangers. As the frantic thoughts kept rolling on, Hinata was finally pulled out of her musings when Kurenai shook her shoulder to get her attention.

"Wha?" Hinata blinked at her sensei, completely puzzled as to why she had pulled her out of her frantic thoughts.

"Hinata. It's your turn." Kurenai said with a firm, but serious voice, with a hint of concern.

Hinata turned to look at the board and all the blood drained out of her face immediately.

Hyuga Hinata versus Hyuga Neji.

"You won't make a good Shinobi. Forfeit now." Those were the first words Neji said to Hinata when she got down and it did nothing to help her anxiety at all. "You are weak. You avoid conflict and choose to follow instead of asserting yourself. You never resist because you're too afraid. You have no self-confidence and you have always felt that you are inferior to those around you. You cannot defeat me and you know it. Forfeit now or I can't promise I won't hurt you." Neji continued in an icy tone of voice, completely devoid of emotion as his Byakugan stared indifferently at Hinata.

Hinata shifted nervously. "I.." She gulped. "I just wanted... to change myself..." She looked away from Neji's piercing eyes.

"People can never change. Destiny dictates it as such." Neji replied, slicing directly through Hinata's heart and hopes. "Losers are losers, their personality and strength will never change. People are simply born into their destinies and they will die following the threads of Fate. You know as well as I do, that the difference between us can never be reconciled and we will forever remain as we are – you will always remain a member of the main house, and I, a member of the Branch house. That is all we can ever be." Neji's cold voice rang through the room, reverberating from the concrete walls and seemingly echoed within the mind of Hinata.

She bit her lip hard enough to make it bleed, but she didn't care. She felt as if her entire world was collapsing around her, her hopes, her dreams were slowly fading away. She remembered all those training sessions with her father, how he had continuously scolded her on her weak stance, her timid personality, her futile attempts at offensive manoeuvres. She remembered feeling a pit of jealousy as she watched from the sidelines how everyone in the household would praise her younger sister for her performance and skill, while they completely ignored her existence all together. All these dark thoughts threatened to overwhelm her until a calm and gentle voice broke through her trance.

"Hinata!" She blinked and looked up at the origin of the voice, Naruto. He smiled gently back at her, making her heart once again skip a few beats. "I believe in you. Ganbatte! (Do your best!)" Those were all the words he offered in support, but they were all the words she needed to bring herself back. She gave him a tiny smile back, though nervous, she had already made up her mind to fight Neji, no matter what the outcome.

Hinata lowered her head to try and collect all her courage. Thank you, Naruto-kun, for standing on my side, for supporting me, for understanding me. The realisation hit her like a freight train. Those were the words I had always wanted to hear from my father, but he

never gave them to me. He never gave me any encouragement at all, and I've tried so damn hard to get him to notice me but he doesn't. Everything I do is never good enough in his eyes. No matter what small achievement I've gained, he'll always compare it to the wealth of accomplishments that my sister had attained. I've been waiting for so long to hear those words from someone I looked up to, someone who is a person of authority in my mind. Not just Kurenai-sensei, Kiba-kun, Akamaru-kun or Shino-kun, but someone who I truly respect and admire, someone whom I wanted to notice me.

Hinata's smile brightened though she kept her head lowered. I understand now why I act as I did around Naruto-kun, at least... some of it anyway. He gave me what I've always strived for, the sense of achievement and the feeling that I'm not just a burden. Arigato Naruto-kun. Without you, I doubt I'll ever be able to change by myself. From now on, I won't runaway anymore Arigato.

Having completely understood her own feelings (as much of it as possible for now), Hinata lifted her head finally and turned her determined gaze at Neji, readying herself into a Jyuuken fighting stance. "I'm ready now, Neji-niisan. Let us fight."

(1) Original Kibi Jutsu! Kaze – Wind, Dan – Bullets. It's basically a ball of air being flung at one direction, it is NOT the Rasengan because the Chakra doesn't swirl around itself, the air just goes in ONE direction, and cannot be changed. Though it is the size of a basketball, it is a very weak wind attack, used only to bruise their opponent and cause them immense pain for a short time without any permanent injuries. Inspired by the attack launched by Shukaku against GamaBunta.

(2) Original Kirin Jutsu! Not sure if that's how you translate the English into Japanese but "Gekitai" is suppose to mean "repel or drive away" and "Jiki" is "magnetism". Kirin uses both magnetics and gravity as her power.

(3) New original jutsu, very simple – it just lets the person travel underground, that's all.

(4) Original Kibi Jutsu! Direct translation from English using a dictionary - 'ho' means 'let go', 'sui' is 'water', and 'ho' is 'cannon'. I guess you could say it's inspired by watching too much Pokemon.

(5) Original Kibi Jutsu! Once again, not sure of the translations, in Chinese, lightning strike is something like "Da Lei", so I got the Japanese translation of those words. 'Da' means 'hit', and 'Lei' is 'lightning', so I hope I got it right - 'Da Rai.' Another influence from Pokemon.

Um.. I kinda switched Kiba and the original Naruto's roles with that little scene about arguing with the referee. Hope you don't mind, it's just that I think Kiba is the type who likes to complain, especially when nothing is going his way. ;;

Another little scene between Hinata and Naruto. YAY! For those of you who are hounding me to start pushing for a relationship, any relationship, you are going to be sorely disappointed. I don't plan on having any romantic build up in the plot for a long time yet. So please be satisfied with these little snippets here and there because they are all you're gonna get for a long while.

As for the long, boring bit from Hinata-chan's point of view, well, someone asked me how come Hinata had just suddenly formed a crush on Naruto, well, here's the answer to that. She didn't really. ;; It's more like respect first, then admiration, and then a type of idolisation and then a crush. ;;; I hope I didn't make Hinata too out of character, but I gave something like a split personality that Sakura had. Hope you all like it. Uh.. Neji turned out to be kinda cold in this chapter, oh well. I'll try to fix him up in the next chapter.

Not the best fight scene I've come up with, but enough to keep the plot moving along. Hopefully the next chapter will be up soon and it'll be the end of the Preliminary exam (Hinata Vs Neji, Gaara Vs Lee)

so wish me luck and please keep up with the reviews. You know I love to read them.

Finally, I'd like to thank one of my beta-readers 'Reeki Shadowstar' for practically rewriting most of Hinata's perceptions and thoughts to make her more 'in' character.

Chapter 13

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter Twelve: Training Pt1

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

Tori mirage: Yes. That's it. You can complain all you want but that won't make me go any faster. In fact, complaining would only lead to pissing me off and then I won't even bother typing up the next chapter for at least a few more weeks. nn Somehow, I don't think that's what you want... Thanks for the review but I really can't help the amount of time I use - depends on my muse, depends on how long I edit, depends on how long my beta-readers take to edit, etc. It can't be helped.

Shadow Eclipse, anonymous, michaelbirotte, sonydjsnmix, anon-entity, babowonsuni, stoictimer, Rubymoon17, Gopu, Night-Owl123, Hitomi no Ryu, Ino-chan613, Ookima: Thank you all for your continual support. I really appreciate it.

Dalavita: Actually, the Rasengan does have 8 stages (Narutofan, Narutoinfo, Inane manga scanalations and even the anime series), it's just that Naruto only learnt up to the 3rd stage in the original storyline, so we don't know what the other stages are and can only guess. This is an AU story, Naruto had already spent 6 years of his life with Jiraiya, so he's already mastered how to summon a Rasengan on each hand. Hope that clears most of the confusion.

Wormkaizer: Sorry, there won't be any Hinata Vs Neji. I just wanted to skip along to the part where Naruto finally meet up with Ruri. Hope you don't mind.

ErikKoekKoek: Seisu Keiki Kanojo? Actually, I've never heard of that anime before. Does it have an English name? And Thanks for your review.

Jenniyah: Well, Orochimaru can't touch Naruto anymore. Before, he just wasn't interested in the boy because he didn't think he'd have much potential. After he found out Naruto was Jiraiya's student, I think Orochimaru will be especially put off, considering the role of the 4th hokage had also been stolen from him by another of Jiraiya's students. nn;; And anyway, after he finds out that Naruto is part of that 'Uzumaki' family, he can't touch the boy. You'll see why soon.

Xero-ghost: Thank you soo much for your reviews. Yup, Naruto will be meeting his Aunt very soon and the interaction between them are.. interesting... to say the least. nn;; On one hand, Naruto respects his Aunt and sort of idolises her (he certainly doesn't idolise Jiraiya). On the other hand, he's completely terrified of her. TT heh heh. You'll just have to see what happens.

FlareOfDragon: I can't do regular updates. I'm sorry but I write via my inspirations. Sometimes (on good days), I would finish a chapter in 2 days; sometimes, it does take up to 3 weeks just to get one chapter done. Not to mention, I still need to get approval from 3 of my beta-readers before posting. As for your other comment, at the bottom of the chapter where the footnotes are, I've already stated that the attack IS similar to Gaara's air blast only on a much smaller scale and the fact that it cannot change direction mid-way.

Sally: Yeah.. I've been warned that it's easy to make Naruto too powerful or too arrogant of his abilities and I really didn't want that. Yes, he's strong in the physical sense but he does have a lot of other issues too. He's not perfect and I doubt I'll ever make him invincible.

Insanity: Thanks for the Mary-sue comment. I'll keep that in mind but it's a bit difficult because Ruri doesn't actually fight... --;; Kaga does.. sort of... but he doesn't get hurt though... Ah! I'll think about it when I get there! Yeah.. at first I thought it would be enough to use just Kibi in the chapter, but I really wanted to give just a small glimpse of what each of the foxes can do, and in this way, it showcases that as well as Naruto's in-efficiency at using them. Half the time, he really doesn't know how to use them. nn;; Think of the shield like a magnetic wave barrier with pressurised air, being resonated from Kirin's body (centre of gravity). But in this sense, she wasn't creating a full circle wavelength, only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the wave circle is being emitted, these waves are created from her fur. Um.. I hope I didn't confuse you anymore, I know that isn't a very sound explanation but it'll do for now. Having a normal wound and a wound from the use of the Tenkun no buki are very different. Normal wounds I would let Naruto heal overnight, but with those injuries caused by the use of a Tenkun no buki, it takes far longer for Naruto to heal, on a normal person, they would be paralysed for life. You remember how long it took Naruto to finally recover from his use of the Ginshi no himo, one whole month! But anyway, Ruri will fix him up soon. Once again, thanks for the techniques, I'll keep them in mind.

Okay People! I'm happy to announce that I've extended my planned double chapter update into a THREE chapter update. Please reframe from flaming me unless you have a valid reason.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. I've decided NOT to write out Hinata's, Lee's and Choji's fights, but I will give you some highlights from the Hinata Vs Neji fight and the Lee Vs Gaara's fight.

=...= means "thoughts"

---- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 12

Naruto trudged dejectedly behind Jiraiya, with his head tilted down and his mind wandering over the last three fights in the preliminary exam, specifically, Hinata's and Lee's battles. He sighed again as the pictures replayed inside his mind.

[FLASHBACK]

One gentle palm to the chest followed by a direct point to the girl's right arm, and Hinata started spewing up blood from her mouth. All the audience watched in silent horror as the fragile looking girl tried again to attack the seemingly invincible Neji, but was grabbed firmly instead as he slowly but surely pulled her jacket's sleeve up, revealing to the world all the bruised points upon Hinata's arm. One more flick of his palm and Hinata's battered body was flung backwards, slamming onto the hard ground.

Humiliated, hurt and probably scared, Hinata slowly struggled onto her feet until she was standing unsteadily. She looked up and locked eyes with Naruto's firm ones. He gave her a determined look and nodded. She, in turn, smiled in reply, happy to at least have his support even though she was bleeding and bruised.

Again and again, no matter how harsh the assault, no matter how much it hurt, Hinata stood up, always standing up, if only to meet Naruto's approving eyes once more. =I won't run! I won't run! I have someone here who accepts me, no matter how badly I perform. I want to look my best in front of him. I won't shy away. I won't hide. I don't want to hide from him, not from someone I respect. Arigato Naruto-kun. It seems I've at least found some of the courage I've always wanted...= However, her thoughts were cut short when Neji slammed his palm right into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her while she collapsed onto the floor coughing up more blood.

Unknown to Neji, Hinata wasn't listening to his vicious words at all, she was looking into his cold eyes - eyes that held so much pain hidden behind a façade of indifference and anger, anger at the main

family and the world as a whole. Suddenly, she realised that she wasn't the only one in pain, how she had never noticed how much her cousin suffered, she didn't know. But now that she could see it, she won't ignore it, and she won't runaway from it either, not like what Neji was doing. =I've already found a way out of the darkness, I won't let him stay there either.= "It's not me at all, Neji-niisan... The person who is lost and suffering within the destiny of the main and branch houses... is you..." She whispered.

Above on the balconies, Naruto prepared himself to jump in to stop Neji's wild attack but was held firmly back by the grip of Jiraiya's hand on his shoulder. "Don't." The older man replied firmly, while Haku jumped down with the other Jounin instructors, Haku was one of the first to the scene - he wasn't involved in holding Neji back, unlike the other Jounin instructors or the referee - his job was to see to Hinata's injuries as the fight was officially over. Watching as Hinata's knee buckled and how she finally lost consciousness, Naruto ignored Jiraiya's words and rushed towards her anyway, feeling an incredible sense of guilt and pride at the same time. Sliding to a stop beside Haku, Naruto tried to assist in Haku's immediate healing of the girl's severe injuries, only to be blocked by Haku's hands.

"You're still injured Naruto! I don't want to deal with two people collapsing on me!" Haku hissed but never stopping his hands from moving over the unconscious girl. "MEDIC!! Get down here NOW!" He yelled across the room and his fellow medic ninjas all ran towards him as called.

Knowing Haku was right, all Naruto could do was hold onto one of the pale girl's hands firmly and whispered softly: "I'm proud of you," before letting go and moving away so the other medic nins could attend to the girl's injuries then carry her back towards the medical wing.

[END FLASHBACK]

Naruto sighed again as he felt the overwhelming guilt slam back into his psyche. =Maybe it would have been better if I didn't encourage her... Maybe she wouldn't have been hurt so badly if I didn't egg her on. But then again, Neji seems like the kind of guy whose bent on hurting her no matter what anyone else tries to do...= He was abruptly brought out of his musings when Jiraiya snapped at him.

"Oi! Stop thinking so loudly! I can hear it from here!!" Naruto stopped moving and looked up at his sensei standing close to twenty metres in front. "Hurry up! Naruto! I really can't imagine what hell Ruri is going to give us once we finally turned up!" Jiraiya said as he turned around and continued to stomp his way forward.

Naruto had to run to catch up to the tall man, with Kibi and Kirin keeping up on both his sides. Once again walking side by side with the pervert Sennin, Naruto couldn't help but return his thoughts to the other battle that had really affected him, the fight between Lee and Gaara.

[FLASHBACK]

It was definitely the most intense fight that Naruto had ever watched in a very long time. He was amazed at the different layers of Absolute defences Gaara had up his sleeve, and he was even more amazed at the speed of Lee's movements. =He's definitely faster than me by a lot. There's no way I can keep up with that kind of speed.= Looking towards Gaara's indifferent expression, Naruto thought to himself. =I don't think I'd be able to beat his first defence, let alone the second one...not without the Tenkun no buki anyway... Man, this guy is strong... too strong to be just a Genin...=

Naruto's grip upon the railings tightened as he watched Lee's first Omote Renge (Initial Lotus) go to waste because Gaara had already escaped the bindings of Lee's bandages and replaced himself with a moulded figure created from sand. =LEE! BEHIND YOU!!= Naruto silently cheered, but was so focused on the fight that he literary jumped when Sakura (who was standing beside him) started shouting encouragements to Lee as well.

They were both shocked when Lee seemingly recovered from his body's pains and was able to move as fast as he had been before. =NO WAY! THE EXTREME LOTUS (1)!!= Naruto had heard from Jiraiya that this was an extremely powerful but deadly move; a Kinjutsu (Forbidden Technique) that may well cost the user his or her life. =Heh... Isn't that the type of fire I play with every time I use the Tenkun no buki?= Naruto thought ironically that both he and Lee had a lot in common. However, while Lee learnt these extremely powerful moves willingly to help him attain his dreams, Naruto had been forced into learning how to control the Tenkun no Buki just because he was the last Uzumaki, and sooner or later, he would be taking over his Aunt's roles as the Master of Oracles. =Heh... not if I find a way to escape my fate. There's no way they're gonna force me into that role without my consent. My goal is to become Hokage, and if I have to merge the Hidden Air village into Konoha to attain my goals, so be it.= Naruto thought determinately.

It wasn't long after Lee released all five of the eight celestial gates within his body that the fight finally ended. Lee made a last ditch effort to beat Gaara but in the end, Gaara's gourd of sand still protected the boy from injury and poor Lee was knocked unconscious with a brutally crushed arm and leg as a result of the fight. Haku had once again been the first to the scene with the rest of his team members following behind. Having one look at the boy, Haku had declared him as being in a critical condition, and should be moved into the emergency rooms immediately. Haku then turned towards the still teary eyed Gai and gave the Jounin instructor the bad news.

Naruto was not there; he did not think he could stand next to the injured boy and not let his anger lash out at the Sand Genin. However, he was still able to read Haku's lips and what he found out from Haku truly shocked him. "With his body, this boy will never be able to live as a Shinobi again." Those were the words that left Haku's lips as he gave the Jounin Instructor a sympathetic and sad expression, silently giving the man his condolences before moving away with the rest of the Medic team.

Only minutes later, after Choji and Dosu's short battle, all the final participants of the Chuunin Exam stood in a line in front of the Hokage, awaiting the explanations of the final Exam. "The exam will be held one month from now. What you do with that one-month period is for you to decide. Now, please pick one of the papers from the raffle box."

Each of the participants picked a numbered paper from the raffle box, leaving the last one for Sasuke, the only missing participant of the Exam. After the registration of their numbers the battle line up is as follows: (one) Uzumaki Naruto versus (two) Hyuuga Neji, , (three) Gaara versus (four) Uchiha Sasuke, (five) Haruno Sakura versus (six) Dosu Kinuta, (seven) Kankuro versus (eight) Aburame Shino, and finally (nine) Temari versus (ten) Shikamaru. With all the preparatory tasks taken care of, the participants then started scattering to their own destinations. Naruto had informed Sakura that he wouldn't be training with Kakashi and them anymore, because he'll be undergoing his own training. Sakura had accepted his wishes and had promised to tell Kakashi (whom had disappeared once the prelims were over) once she found him.

[END FLASHBACK]

Shaking his head to clear all the random thoughts out of his mind, Naruto looked up in shock at the Hokage tower. =When did we reach here so quickly?!= He panicked, knowing that his Aunt was probably silently fuming at his lateness. Naruto gulped but suppressed any other signs of nervousness as he followed Jiraiya into said building as stiffly as he could. Walking through the doors, they were promptly met by several Anbu guards. Luckily, some of them recognised Jiraiya and let the both of them into the building without further problems.

As Naruto climbed the stairs up towards the highest room of the tower, he forced his body to numbly follow Jiraiya. Finally reaching their destination, Jiraiya slowly pushed the wooden doors open without knocking first, and Naruto lowered his head to prepare

himself for any outbursts of anger. However, to both their surprise, no explosion awaited them at all.

Upon entering the Hokage's office as if they were invited, they were met by two pairs of indifferent and calm gazes. One was a female figure seated calmly on one of the chairs next to the Hokage's desk, while another male figure stood coolly by her side. Kibi and Kirin happily ran up to their other mistress and immediately sat confidently by her side, awaiting any further commands. Finally, Naruto breathed in deeply and stepped forward into the room, walking towards his Aunt. He then suddenly knelt down onto one knee as he lowered his head again in a show of respect. "Forgive us for our lateness, Lady Oracle of the Air. I have no excuse except that I have been preoccupied with other matters." He mumbled softly. Naruto could feel the piercing gaze burning a hole into his head as he refused to lift it up.

"Is that all you're going to say?" was her calm and monotone reply.

Inwardly, Naruto flinched at the comment but outwardly, he only allowed himself to nod slightly. Lady Ruri gave a soft sigh as her eyes trailed away from her slightly cowering nephew to look upon his sensei, Jiraiya. Feeling her eyes firmly focused on him made Jiraiya shift nervously on his toes.

In any other situation, Jiraiya would have loved to have any young woman staring at him as Lady Ruri was currently doing. But even so, he still felt as if the oracle's gaze was seeing right through him, looking and analysing his very soul. Even though he knew Ruri was unable to read his mind or anything like that, but it was still unnerving to have her full gaze focused on you.

The uneasiness wasn't due to the Lady being ugly or anything. In fact, if asked, Jiraiya would have replied that the Lady Oracle was down right beautiful. She had long, blonde, sun-kissed hair flowing down her back, reaching almost to the back of her thighs; with pale white but incredibly smooth looking skin; and her deep, sky-blue eyes that would reflect light and hope given any darkness. It was in

the eyes that you could see the true resemblance between Naruto and the Lady Oracle, for these bright and amazing clear blue eyes ran only in the Uzumaki bloodline. That was basically all the similarities that they shared.

Unlike Naruto, who prefers to wear vibrant colours or non-descript colours depending on his mood; Lady Ruri was always seen in a white dress; it may come in different styles and patterns, but it will always be a white dress - as dictated by the Uzumaki family legacy. This time, she wore a two-piece dress. Her top was high collared and long sleeved, stretching down to her knees (2) while she wore another skirt underneath that stretched all the way down to the floor, covering her shoes.

Next to her, stood her loyal bodyguard and protector, Kaga, the only true shadow master left. He too, wore his traditional black ninja outfit: a fishnet shirt, covered by a tight black 'gi'; slightly baggy black pants with some bandages strapped across them; heavy metal arm bands on both of his arms with fingerless gloves underneath; and finally, his two black high combat boots that was the only 'non-traditional' ninja type attires he wore. Kaga's face was completely covered up by bandages (3) due to the severe burns he had attained since his childhood, only his clear emerald eyes and a slight bang of chestnut hair can be seen peaking out of his bandaged face and head.

Finally, Ruri decided to end the enduring silence by turning her attention back to Naruto. "Come here, Naruto. Take off your shirt and let me see your back." She said calmly, though the overtone of authority was very clearly heard.

Naruto complied, slowly peeling his jacket and shirt off, placing it on the near by table (neatly folded of course) before manoeuvring himself to sit in front of his Aunt, with his bandaged back facing her. She placed her right hand over his injured back and arms, then started murmuring soft words as she activated the special healing jutsu taught to every Air nin ever established. Though very similar to the Chiyute no Jutsu (Healing Hands Techniques) used by most Medic ninjas, this particular healing technique does not require hand

seals and instead of just pushing the healer's Chakra into the one being healed, it actually stimulates the injured person's own body to start regenerating itself and create it's own healing Chakra, guided by the healer of course.

Due to the visions of the future and the past, not to mention having done this many times before, it only took the Lady several minutes to be done with the process of healing Naruto's back and arms completely. Once the process had finished, Naruto automatically stood up again without being asked to. He stretched his previously aching muscles until they were no longer stiff and then started cutting off all the bandages, revealing a perfectly smooth back with unscarred skin.

Jiraiya whistled in admiration as Naruto pulled his shirt and jacket on again. "Man. You're as good as Tsunade when it comes to healing, why didn't you ever take up the medic nin profession instead, eh?" He said smugly, trying to lighten up the tension in the room.

Unfortunately for him, Ruri did not appreciate such jokes and replied back coldly: "I'm an Uzumaki. We don't get to *choose* our own careers." Jiraiya shifted in nervousness again, mentally berating himself for even trying to get some reaction out of the despondent Lady Oracle.

By the time Naruto was finally dressed, he turned around to face his Aunt again, waiting for whatever she had planned for him. Ruri took a few more moments to stare at him before finally starting her explanations as to why she would come here to Konoha in the first place. "You seem well, Naruto." He nodded in return. "You're probably wondering why I'm here." It was not a question, and again, Naruto nodded in return. "I'm here to attend your Chuunin Exam." Naruto's eyes widened slightly at the implication of this statement.

Jiraiya was about to protest when Ruri continued forward with her explanations. "And as long as *I'm* here, and *you're* participating in the exam, you *will* be representing the Hidden Air village instead of Konoha. This means that you will be wearing the Hidden Air head

protector instead of the Leafs. Now, as to your training, you have one month from today to become as strong as possible. You will spend three weeks with Jiraiya learning how to properly control, maintain and manipulate your Chakra; then you will spend the rest of your time with me. Any questions?" The Lady said confidently.

Jiraiya closed his mouth. He knew there was no point in debating further. Even though Naruto was now officially registered as a Shinobi of the Hidden Leaf village, but anyone who has connections to the Hidden Air must take up the banner of the Air whenever a dignitary of the same village came across them in any public event. It is true that the rest of the world rarely sees anyone originating from the Hidden Air village but when they do appear, their traditions dictate that they have to proudly wear the Hidden Air symbol in any important public functions, to ensure their own safety. Traditionally, all Hidden Air personnel are neutral in their stances in whatever dispute. As long as no one interferes with them, they don't interfere back. It's a very twisted philosophy but it is what their traditions dictate and it is one of the most important rules that the people of the Air follows.

Suddenly, Kaga threw a small scroll at Jiraiya whom clumsily caught it due to his surprise at the move. Before he could even voice his thoughts, Ruri started explaining her plans for them for the next two weeks of training. "Jiraiya." Said man looked up at Ruri's stern gaze. "You must follow every instruction written on that scroll, for it is the planned training schedule for Naruto for the next three weeks. Follow it word by word. Go to your favourite place to train." Looking confused, Jiraiya could only nod in return, accepting Ruri's orders were much easier then going against her wishes, safer too.

Turning her gaze to Naruto instead this time, she continued with her instructions. "Return Kibi to his stable form." Naruto blushed slightly at having forgotten about Kibi completely. He did as told and was surprised that this time, the aftershock of having a huge surge of Kyuubi's Chakra flowing through his veins didn't hurt as much as

before. It still throbs, yes, just not to the same extent as when he re-sealed Kirin.

Looking back to his Aunt in confusion, Naruto waited for her to tell him what the differences were between the two incidences. "When you are injured and low on Chakra, the limited amount of Chakra left cannot be used to protect the inner coil system, coating the walls to prevent any further burns due to the forced surge of Kyuubi's Chakra." Ruri explained evenly.

"When I taught you how to summon both Kirin and Kibi, or even any other jutsu or Summoning that requires a large amount of Chakra, your body unconsciously coats the veins of your inner coil system to prevent it from been burnt from the inside out while the surge of Chakra travels through it. You remember the first time you practiced the Rasengan?" Naruto nodded, remembering how his hands were completely burnt from the excess Chakra that swirled around in his palm. Even his arms were hurting.

"That was because you didn't coat any of your inner coil veins. Most people actually don't do this because it's not really necessary. However, any smart man would know that causing him-self harm during a fight would probably be the stupidest thing to do. And so, that was one of the first things I taught you, imprinting it into your subconscious mind so that it would happen automatically every time you use a high level jutsu." Ruri paused for a bit to let that information sink in before continuing on. "When you re-sealed Kirin, your body was already worn by Orochimaru's fight and then coupled with Kiba's, it didn't have any more reserves left for you to protect yourself from your own backlash. But now that you are completely healed, you can feel the difference obviously." Ruri said nonchalantly, as if she was talking about the weather instead.

Naruto nodded numbly as he reviewed the information given. He would have to keep that in mind whenever he uses large amounts of chakra consuming jutsus next time. He was taken out of his musings by the last orders of his Aunt. "If that is all, then leave the vicinity to start your training immediately. Kibi and Kirin are to stay with me until

your three week period is up." Bowing to the command, both Jiraiya and Naruto disappeared from the room into a cloud of smoke.

After several moments of silence, Ruri finally sighed and rested back onto her chair as if in weariness. "You didn't tell him." Kaga stated softly from beside his mistress. Ruri shook her head.

"No. He doesn't need to know. Not yet anyway." Ruri's words were cut off as the door to the Hokage's office slid open once again, this time, to emit the 3rd Hokage of Konoha himself. Ruri and Kaga both stood up before bowing slightly in respect to the elder ninja, and the Hokage returned the gesture with his own bow of respect.

"It is a great honour to finally meet you face to face, Lady Oracle of the Air. And it is a pleasure to see you again, Kaga-san, Shadow warrior." The Hokage replied diplomatically as he quietly shut the door behind him.

"The pleasure is ours, Hokage-sama." Ruri answered back, also with a very diplomatic expression on her face.

"Hmm..." Hokage smiled as he slowly trotted to his worn looking chair behind his paper filed table. Sitting down comfortably, he gestured for his guests to sit as well. Ruri sat down on her original chair while Kaga opted to stand beside her at the exact same location he had stood beforehand. "So... what brings the great and wise leader of the entire Air village here to my humble Konoha?" Hokage laughed as he enquired.

"War is at your doorstep." Ruri replied suddenly, completely cutting off all diplomatic procedures. "It would be wise for you to prepare yourself."

All humour gone, the Hokage looked at Ruri with a very serious expression on his face. "If this is about the Dokudes Hyuuga incident (4), I sincerely apologies for my subject's actions. However, going to war is certainly a bit extreme. Not to mention, the incident happened

so long ago too..." The Hokage tried to waddle himself out of a dangerous situation with the Air mistress.

"The air is not your enemy. Though we are not exactly what you would call 'friend' either. It is the Sound you should be prepared for. After all, you already know that it was your former student, Orochimaru whom founded the Sound village." Ruri replied back, coldly but without pause. "And as for that 'Dokudes Hyuuga' incident - as you liked to call it - there will be repercussions to that dispute. However, it will not be the Uzumaki that would take up vengeance." Ruri's voice dropped to an icy tone, as if threatening the Hokage.

The tension in the room was so apprehensive that everyone in there could literally feel the sparks of electricity waiting to burn off all the pressure. Releasing a heavy sigh, the old Hokage seem to slump into his chair. "I know. I just hope that the rest of the Leaf villagers will not be involved in your dispute with the Main Hyuuga family. Please give me your word that the Air would not attack any innocent people in your quest for justice." The Hokage looked old, tired and with a slight pleading glint in his eyes as he gazed at the Lady in white.

Ruri gave him a short nod. "No matter what the situation, every Air Shinobi are inherently neutral, they would not stick their noses into other people's affairs unless provoked. However, they would also not allow anyone to disrespect their family and clansmen. What the Hyuuga family did was unforgivable in the eyes of the Dokudes clan, and their young representatives will carry out justice. Know that the Uzumaki clan and the Ruling counsellors do not have a grudge against the Leaf. After all, it is where Naruto's origins are from, and because of that, the Leaf and Air share a unique bond."

The Hokage sighed again in relief this time. However, his wishful expression soon disappeared into a more serious one again. "Okay. Let's leave that issue alone for now. We have a common enemy in Orochimaru that we must concentrate on annihilating." He nodded firmly to himself, as if forcing himself to accept this truth.

He was pulled out of his musings however when Ruri declined the offer to fight. "The Air will not participate in the clash between the Leaf and the Sound. As I have said before, we are inherently neutral and we cannot favour one side or the other."

"But Naruto was involved in a battle against Orochimaru and was badly hurt as a result. Don't you think that would be a good enough reason to act, Lady!" The Hokage protested, knowing that having Ruri and Kaga's involvement would help the Leaf a great deal if a war was to come.

"Naruto was wearing the Leaf head protector when he fought against Orochimaru. That means he was fighting as a Leaf nin, not an Air nin, and therefore it is of no the concern of the Air. If, however, he were to fight wearing the Air head protector, then if Orochimaru still attacked him, the attack would be seen as declaring war on the entire Air village." Ruri said firmly. "Those are the rules of engagement. I will not break those ancient rules."

Hokage sighed as he felt a headache coming along. Rubbing his forehead warily, he finally succumbed to the inevitable. "So, what are you doing here then, Lady Oracle? If you are not prepared to fight with us, what do you plan to do?" He asked tiredly. =Damn it! I can't win in this verbal battle. But then again, I am going against a prophetess in the first place... Damn it!=

Ruri gave a small smile in victory. "I'm simply here to watch the show... and to warn you about your upcoming problems concerning Orochimaru... so I suggest that you start summoning all your Shinobis for an inter-room assembly to discuss the problem at hand."

Naruto blinked as he followed Jiraiya to the hot springs of Konoha. =So this is where she meant when she told him to take me to his favourite place...= He thought as he pondered what he would be learning. =If it's about walking on water, then I already know all that.=

Stopping directly in front of a large pool of steaming water, Jiraiya opened the small scroll given to him by Kaga to have a look at what the Lady Oracle had planned for the both of them. As he read silently to himself, his brows furrowed and then widened in amazement. Blinking to clear his head, Jiraiya finally rolled up the scroll, hid it somewhere on his person and finally turned towards Naruto with a slightly sadistic grin on his face.

Naruto looked at his sensei with suspicion in his eyes. "What?" He snapped. If possible, Jiraiya grin only widened in reply, which only led Naruto to become more nervous than he already was.

"Okay. Kid... We both know that you know how to walk on water, right?!" Naruto slowly nodded. "So, can you perform a handstand on the water instead?" Naruto blinked, looking confused at the white haired man. Jiraiya still had his sadistic grin plastered on his face. "Well, go on. Try it!"

Turning towards the still steaming water, Naruto prepared to place his hands on it, only to get burnt in the process and quickly pulled his hands back, yelping in shock at the heat of the water. "Aha! I forgot to tell you!!" Jiraiya chuckled on Naruto's unfinished performance, earning a glare. "The water here is at least 60 degrees! (5) If you fall, you might become a boiled egg soon!!"

Naruto glared at the perverted Sennin, mentally screaming that he would prove to the old man he could do it. He quickly stood up again, focusing chakra on his hands and then jumped into the water, forcing his body into a vertical, up-side-down stance, and firmly placing his hands on top of the water. Naruto lasted all of one second before the heat of the water started burning through the thin chakra barrier he had created to surround his hands and began heating up his palms, distracting him enough to lose focus on the chakra flow so he ended up falling straight into the pool.

Naruto immediately hauled himself out of the incredibly hot water, only to watch as his sensei literary roll around the ground, clutching his stomach and laughing hysterically. Naruto's eyebrow twitched in

irritation and his eyes blazed with fury at how humiliated he was currently feeling. "STOP LAUGHING!!! YOU OLD PERVERT!!!" Naruto yelled in frustration and anger.

Eventually, Jiraiya was able to pull himself together again before finally taking the time to look back at a disgruntled Naruto, mentally fighting off the urge to laugh again if he valued his life. He sighed as he tried to explain what Naruto was doing wrong. "Well, this was the first exercise listed on the scroll. Basically, we're use to standing on water or on trees and ignored the fact that our shoes usually protect us from most of the elements. Yes, it is true that our feets are the hardest places to focus chakra on, but our hands are also equally difficult to precisely command chakra as well. So, there are two things that must happen before you'd be able to fully complete a handstand on such hot water. One, you have to be able to balance the amount of chakra used to protect your hands from the elements, in this case, the steaming water underneath you while you also balance your body without falling sideways. Two, you have to precisely control the amount of chakra released to keep you afloat on the water's surface. Basically, Ruri wants you to keep on practicing until you could continue to hold the hand stand for at least 3 hours a day." Jiraiya smirked as he looked at Naruto's bewildered look and waited for the reaction.

"3 HOURS!!!!" Naruto bellowed in protest, drawing many attentions as the people inside the bathhouses took a peak outside at all the noise. "I can't hold out that long! Hell, I'm not even sure I can hold out for 2 hour at standing on the water on my own two feet!"

"Sorry, kid! But that's what the scroll said." Jiraiya continued to smirk at his student. Standing up to his full height, Jiraiya gave Naruto another sadistic look. "Well, guess I'll leave you to it then. See you tomorrow, Naruto." Jiraiya turned away from the bathhouse and hot springs and started walking away.

Shaking all the shock away, Naruto glared at Jiraiya before yelling: "Where do you think you're going!!??"

Without pausing Jiraiya called back with his own reply. "There's nothing else I can do for you. You have to figure it out yourself. And remember, Naruto. Practice! Practice! Practice!!" Jiraiya's form disappeared into the distance, leaving a fuming Naruto behind. Naruto growled low in his throat before turning away and returning to his training. =I'LL SHOW HIM!! I'M GOING TO SUCCEED BY TOMORROW!!= He vowed silently to himself.

For the rest of the day, Naruto continued on with his practice, each time enabling him to stay on top of the water for longer periods of time. After the first hour of constant strain, forcing the chakra to keep him above the water while burning his hands in the process and trying to keep his body from toppling over and of course failing, Naruto had found himself completely soaked and had thrown most of his clothes away in an attempt to lighten his body's weight. Another hour of practice had him bandaging both his hands from the almost severe first-degree burns on them while he continued with his training. During the third hour, Naruto had found it very difficult to concentrate due to all the steam covering his eyes and the rest of his body, making him sweat, distracting him enough to make him fall. He finally took a short break, buying something from the near by shops to eat before summoning forth some of Kyuubi's chakra to heal his hands. He maybe exhausted but was not willing to quit just yet.

=Don't think about doing it! Just DO it!= Naruto thought to himself as he remembered Kaga's favourite phrase as he tested Naruto's endurance while training him during his stay in the Air village. Again and again, Naruto timed himself, forcing himself to stay on top of the water longer than before, and then letting his body collapse into the hot water before finding the strength to pull himself out. He always climbed back up after every failure. This was his true strength, Naruto knew. =I won't give up! I won't give up!= He chanted in his mind, completely focused on the task at hand.

Naruto had known before that he was no genius when it comes to learning things, but after meeting his Aunt, Kaga and the rest of the Air Nins, he finally realised that he was acting like such a baby when

he was younger. Sure, he had pestered Jiraiya until the older man gave in and taught him something new, but Naruto had never really put any effort into respecting those jutsus. He had been so busy running away from the fact that he carried a demon inside of him, that he welcomed any strenuous training able to force his mind to concentrate on other things, namely, staying alive long enough to complete the next jutsu. He never even really completed any of those jutsus either. They were all 'half-arsed.' As in, he couldn't control them very well at all. Even the Rasengan, which was one of his favourite jutsus, he had stopped learning it after the third level when there were eight levels all together. Hell, he couldn't even properly perform the Taiyuu Kaga Bunshins until after he had been forced to improve his Chakra control by his Aunt.

Naruto had learnt from his mistakes. His Aunt and Kaga-san had made him practice things day and night, without rest until they were satisfied with the quality of him doing things, not quantity. Only after he had appeased their sense of 'righteousness', would they give him a break to rest, and at most, it was only half a day.

Jiraiya had always made him to use the most amount of Chakra at any one time, forcing him to practice using Kyuubi's chakra when ever possible. And that only led to Naruto becoming even more stubborn and depressed. However, Ruri and Kaga had concentrated on making Naruto fine-tune most of his jutsus into a workable order. After the additional seal placed on his belly button, Naruto had a limit to which he could use Kyuubi's chakra. With that safeguard in place, Naruto had felt that he could at least feel proud that anything he did from then on was his own achievement, not the Kyuubi's.

Shaking his head to clear his mind, Naruto continued with his practice as the sun slowly lowered itself into the horizon. Naruto ignored the cold as the steaming hot springs continued to boil under his palm. He spent the rest of the night following the same ritual as he did the day.

The second day of training was spent pretty much the same way as he did the first. Naruto had taken some breaks - food, toilet, sleep, etc..., but mostly, he continued with his training. He was finally happy about the progress he had made. By the end of the day, Naruto could stand on the water for a time-duration of one full hour without wobbling at all from the strain. It didn't seem like much but when he started out being unable to withstand even ten seconds of the heat and burns, it seemed like a huge improvement. Naruto had also slowly begun to get use to the burns on his hands and unconsciously, he would continuously release a small portion of Kyuubi's chakra into healing his palms before they could distract him from his balance. And he was also developing quite a high tolerance for heat and burns, especially on the palm of his hands. Overall, he was happy with the progress, not as fast as he wished it to be but better than nothing.

On the third day, Naruto had focussed on channelling his chakra precisely over long periods of time. He was starting to gain the unwanted attention of other people though. The crowds always wandered around, looking at his weird up-side-down stance on the water for hours on end, wondering if he was insane or something. Sometimes, he wondered too, since having most of the chakra controls almost going on subconsciously, Naruto had time to think again (6).

It was late on the third day that Jiraiya finally made an appearance. "So, what'cha up to?" He asked, amused at the display of a half naked, upside-down boy, hand standing on the water's surface.

"2 hours, 45 minutes." Naruto grunted in reply. "And still going strong." He said proudly, as if he was just waiting for the pervert Sennin to contradict him. Jiraiya only chuckled in response as he stood silent, waiting for Naruto to finish up the three hour mark.

Finally, after 2 and half days of training, Naruto had completed the first part of the training program as dictated by Ruri. He sighed as he collapsed onto the ground beside the pool. Truthfully, he wasn't really

that tired, not physically anyway, just mentally from all the concentration work. But at least now, he could probably do the same chakra channelling instantly without having to consciously think about it. It became just a reaction like many of his other movements and practices.

"So... you ready for the next parts?" Jiraiya asked, this time, with a certain tone of concern in his voice.

Naruto sighed, knowing that he would not enjoy what ever his Aunt had conjured up but have no way to escape his fate either way.

"Fine. Just spill it all, okay?"

Jiraiya nodded before he pulled out the scroll of instructions and then spread it out on the floor displaying it to both Naruto and himself as they both settled down opposite one another to view the scroll's content. "Okay, after you've completed the first exercise. You're supposed to try it out with one-hand on the water's surface for 3 hours. You can also practice doing vertical push-ups while you're performing the handstands at the same time. This will enable you to physically exercise your body's muscles as well as your chakra control." At this point, Naruto groaned and Jiraiya smirked in response. "That's not all of it kid. There's more."

"Now, after you've become very familiar with channelling the right amount of chakra instantly to your palms, then comes the hard part of manipulating that chakra into doing what ever you want. It says here that you have to learn how to 'move' yourself across the water without moving any part of your body. You can do this by pushing the chakra from your palm into the water and manipulating the currents underneath you, manoeuvring them until you feel as if you are the one moving across the water. Let me tell you now that this exercise is NOT easy." Jiraiya looked sternly at the pale-faced Naruto.

"Personally, I'm not even that good at it myself. As you can tell, this is strictly Air Shinobi chakra control training. The leaf Nins usually don't go to such an extent with practicing chakra control."

Naruto could only nod in return as he finally realised how difficult the rest of his three weeks training will be. Jiraiya paused a bit longer for the shock to sink in first before continuing on with the rest of the instruction. "If you are able to do that too, then you have come to the really hard part. This is the advance Chakra control stages, where you learn how to manipulate the water currents and movements using your charka, in such a way that you should be able to create small whirlpools and waves surrounding you without affecting your own body's balance. It uses the same concept as before but it takes a lot more concentration and focus."

Pausing once again to let that particular set of information sink in, Jiraiya finally broached the stage where he, himself, would find it very difficult to perform. "If you can actually do that, then you've finally reached the last stage. This final stage requires you to be able to manipulate the pressure in the water. You should be able to use chakra to freely condense the underwater pressures and or release it. For example, you can practice condensing the pressure directly underneath you, then release it quickly, forcing yourself off the water's surface and flipping easily onto other surfaces." Taking a peak at Naruto's ghostly pale face, Jiraiya sighed. "Look, I know this will be hard. I did say before that even I would have problems, especially with this last move. And the scroll did say that you didn't **have** to complete everything, just as long as you practice it whenever you can."

Naruto was feeling very overwhelmed at the moment. He remembered watching the other children of the Hidden Air village practicing some of these exercises. He remembered how he had asked Kaga what they were doing and then laughing at them when they fell. Now that it was his turn to perform the same thing, he finally understood just how HARD some of these training methods were on those young children. =Man! I just knew Aunt Ruri would find some way to torture me...= He groaned internally. Naruto tiredly got up to his feet and looked on resolutely at the hot springs in front of him. "Oh well. You might as well bring some the camping stuff here then.

Looks like I'm going to be staying here for a long while yet." He sighed dejectedly at Jiraiya.

Naruto spent the next few days waking up at the break of dawn (4 in the morning) to start his exercises. Taking a break at 8 for breakfast, returning to his exercise, take another break at 1 for lunch, then going straight back to his training, finally stopping at 6 to take a bath, dinner and then slump into unconscious exhaustion at around 9 or 10, only to start the whole process again the next day.

By the end of the first week, Naruto had reached the third stage in his training. He had successfully manoeuvred himself across the water's surface by using the chakra manipulation techniques he had started to master during his time of training. He was able to stay on his hands for the entire day and had learnt to push himself in any direction via the water currents while doing vertical push-ups at the same time. He was even able to push himself up-stream, going against the water currents when he tried it out once on a real river. After he had collapsed from that particular successful practice session, he took the opportunity to treat himself to a Ramen dinner, Jiraiya paying of course.

Naruto then spent most of the next week practicing the advance stages day after day, night after night, practically collapsing in exhaustion every single day. However, he was only slowly improving his chakra manipulating skills. One day, his anger at the lack of progress finally made him snap. =DAMN IT!! THIS IS HARD!!!= Frustrated, Naruto decided to quit for the rest of the day to travel around the village and to clear his head. He spent some time at the Ichiraku stand, eating several bowls of ramen, before spending the rest of the afternoon on top of the fourth Hokage's head (on the mountain sides) watching the clouds (7).

=What a clear day we have today...= Naruto thought tiredly as he gazed at the clear blue sky. Indeed, it was a cloudless day, blue beyond the horizon and brightly illuminated. Naruto's thoughts began

to wander as his body settled in to have a nice relaxing afternoon. Slowly but surely, Naruto started doze off into a light sleep.

----- **Another vision, so this is in Naruto's dreamscape**

Naruto opened his mental eyes and looked upon the pitch-blackness that surrounds him. =Damn IT! Not this again...= He grumbled.

Once again, there stood a tall dark mirror, not two steps away from Naruto's dreamscape figure. The mirror started shimmering into life and Naruto quickly looked away before any images started appearing on the mirror's surface. Shutting his eyes tightly, Naruto tried to force all the memories and sounds out of his mind. =I don't want to go through this again! I already know it! There's no point in reliving it again and again!!= He willed. And surprisingly enough, he could feel his advance bloodline powers beginning to kick in for the first time since slowly awakening his visionary powers.

He felt his chakra actually responding to his emotions. As he slowly opened his eyes and looked back at the mirror, it continued to shimmer but it no longer showed him his past. He could feel it, the mirror reacting to his mind and emotions, understanding what he was currently feeling and modifying itself to suit him. The mirror would finally stop replaying his memories, he realised. It's evolving just as he was growing out of his original state of mind, the mirror responds to Naruto's growth and wishes by changing itself. Naruto blinked in surprise.

He had heard from the Lady Oracle that when an Uzumaki comes of age (mentally that is), the underlying powers in their advance bloodline would evolve with the child. However, since Naruto had undergone very little growth (in the mental departments anyway) in the past 5 or so years, he had always believed that the rule of thumb didn't apply to him. He had been suspicious that having the Kyuubi contained inside his body had stopped his growth because he was considered quite old to be finally growing out of his childish ways. His aunt Ruri had only been 5 when she first started seeing visions,

and his own mother was around 8 when the same happened to her. Naruto hadn't started his visions until he was 11, which was very old by the standards of the Uzumaki legacy.

Shaking away his thoughts, Naruto looked back at the now blank mirror. =Let's see if I can finally control my visions then...= Concentrating, he could feel his inner voice speaking in a soft tone: "Let me see the future..." Suddenly, an overwhelming surge of Chakra burned through the area of his heart; he could feel his blood literally boiling inside his veins. It was hot, but not hurting him. Confused but not unhappy about the new changes, Naruto focused his energy towards the mirror in front of him. Willing it to understand his new desire and following his command. Surprisingly, it worked.

The dark surface of the mirror faded away, only to show a typical hospital room where a severely injured boy was resting. =LEE!= Naruto thought as he recognised the bandage clad figure. Suddenly, another person came into view. It was Gaara. Naruto tensed as he continued watching Gaara walk towards the edge of Lee's bed. Stretching his right hand over the unconscious boy, sand started to form, floating out of Gaara's gourd and swirling around Lee threateningly. =NO! LEE! WAKE UP!!= Naruto panicked; even as he realised this was only a vision from the future.

All of a sudden, Gaara stopped moving and Shikamaru's figure could be seen on the edge of the viewing mirror's surface. Seeing their mouths moving but with no sound being emitted, Naruto focused more chakra into the mirror, willing it to evolve and forming the ability to emit sound. =I need to know what their talking about!!!= He thought anxiously.

----- **Inside the vision, as shown on the mirror**

"What the hell are you doing here?" Shikamaru asked calmly as he binds Gaara's shadow to his own.

"I was trying to kill him." Gaara answered back simply in a monotone voice.

After a short pause, Shikamaru continued to question Gaara, though beads of sweat were already forming on his forehead. "Why is there a need to do that? You already won the fight. Do you have a grudge against him?"

"I do not." Gaara replied with no emotion in his voice. "I'm going to kill him just because *I want to* ..."

Shikamaru startled at the answer. "You must have had a very, messed up childhood... How selfish can you be?" Even as he said this, Shikamaru's body tensed further.

"If you get in my way, I'll kill you." Gaara threatened menacingly, with narrowed eyes.

Shikamaru relaxed his stance slightly, wanting to present an air of calm and superiority. "You are in my shadow bind. You can't do anything right now. If you promise to leave this boy alone, I'll think about releasing you." He bluffed.

"I'll say it again. Get in my way and I'll kill you." Gaara emphasized.

Eyes narrowing in agitation and nervousness, Shikamaru murmured under his voice. "What kind of Shinobi are you? Killing just for the pleasure of killing?"

"A monster." Gaara answered back with a blank expression. "I'm a real monster." Seeing the confusion in Shikamaru's eyes, Gaara decided to explain for the time being. "I was born into this world by taking the life of the women I would have called my mother... to become the ultimate Shinobi... with my father attaching the incarnation of sand upon me through Ninjutsu. I was born a monster."

Looking at the shocked expression on Shikamaru's face, Gaara continued. "The living spirit of an old Hidden Sand priest, Shukaku, was originally sealed within a kettle, before it was merged with my very being."

"Damn..." Shikamaru murmured, finally realising what kind of trouble he was facing. "What a strange expression of love you Sand Nins have..." He said sarcastically.

Gaara's eyes narrowed in anger. "Love? Family? They're nothing but pieces of meat connected to me with murderous intent and hatred. By sacrificing my mother, the Kazekage, my own father, created the villager's greatest masterpiece. He spoiled me when I was young, allowing me to do as I wish, never punishing me. And then..." Gaara displayed cruel smile. His eyes became wide with an insane look on his face. "When I reached the age of 6, my own father has tried countless times to assassinate me..."

Pausing for a time, Gaara's eyes blazed with fury as he explained why he was hunted. "A being created to be the ultimate tool, and yet I was ultimately unmanageable due to my unstable mind. The villagers finally realised that I was slowly becoming more of a danger than I was worth, so I was to be destroyed like an inanimate object. To them, I *am* an object, to be used and then discarded. An object from the past that they wish would disappear... Then why do I exist, what is my purpose, why am I alive? I needed a reason to exist... and I found one. I exist to kill every human being except myself... As long as there are people out there to kill, my existence is justified..."

The mirror's images faded into darkness once more. Naruto was kneeling on the floor in front of it, his hands clutching his head as if in pain. "No more..." he whispered. "Please no more!!! I don't... I can't... God... not another one..." Inside his mind, the same phrase was repeated over and over. =He's like me... He's like me... He's like me...= Collapsing under the emotional strain inflicted on himself from the vision, Naruto forced his way into consciousness, running as fast as he can away from the truth displayed on the now blank mirror's surface. =I've gotta get out of HERE!!!= Naruto's panicked mind concluded as his dreamscape shattered, allowing him to rise into the conscious world once more.

Naruto screamed in fright as he woke from his sleep. Completely shaken and confused about his surrounding, he quickly looked around only to find himself alone on top of the fourth Hokage's head. The sky had darkened due to the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon and stars. But Naruto could not take the time to appreciate his surrounding's beauty because he was in inner-turmoil. =GOD NO!!! NOT ANOTHER ONE!!! HE'S LIKE ME...= He thought frantically.

Struggling to gain some semblance of balance on his tortured mind, Naruto was completely startled when he heard a calm voice from behind addressing him. "You're not him, Naruto... Remember that." Naruto instantly turned around, only to meet the piercing gaze of his Aunt and the silent shadow figure of Kaga-san behind her.

"I... I..." Naruto struggled to form words to describe his pain, unease, anxiety and other emotions raging inside him but to no avail.

"You do not need to speak Naruto." His Aunt told him softly, eyes sad as if knowing exactly what he was going through right now. "Just remember that you are Uzumaki Naruto, not Gaara of the sand. You are not him and you never will be."

Blinking back tears, Naruto tried to push aside all his uncontrolled emotions, he knew he had many questions that must be asked and yet unable to find the words to voice them. All he could come up with was: "Why? How can I...? I just..." Biting his lip, Naruto's body started shaking, unable to suppress the roaring emotions and stress he had been forcing down for however long, even he wasn't sure.

Then, his aunt did something completely surprising. She knelt down onto the floor next to him and pulled him into a hug. An awkward hug at first, but with all of his emotions running wild, Naruto grasped at his aunt's dress shirt tightly like a lifeline, squeezing his eyes shut and let loose the silent tears that had been waiting to be released. She held him for a long time, firmly but not tightly, letting him know that he had her support no matter what.

And as Naruto's tired body and mind started to slip back into the unconscious world again, Ruri started to speak in a very soft and motherly voice, of which Naruto had never heard from her before. "You are Uzumaki Naruto, the miracle child of Yuuki Hime and the most powerful Hokage in history. You are not a monster, you are a gift...a gift from my sister to help set me free. (8)... One day, Naruto, you will change the world... Let your light guide those whom lived in the darkness."

(1) I don't know the translation in Japanese, so I'll stick with the English version.

(2) It's sort of like Sakura's dress (except it is high collared and with long sleeves), though Ruri wears a long skirt underneath instead of Sakura's green shorts.

(3) Similar to the picture placed on the cover page for Chapter 200 of the Naruto manga.

(4) Dokudes is a powerful clan in the Hidden Air village. They are the poison handlers. This 'incident' between a member of the Dokudes clan and the members of the Hyuuga main family will be explained much later on.

(5) Not sure whether he refers to 'Fahrenheit' or 'Celsius'. That was just what Ebisu said to Naruto in Chapter 90 of the Naruto manga.

(6) Like driving a car - when you start learning, it takes all your concentration. But once you're use to it, you can do other stuff while driving.

(7) Yes, I know this is Shikamaru's favourite pastime, but Naruto can indulge in it once or twice.

(8) Will be explained at the END of the story!! Be patient.

You know, I REALLY didn't plan that last bit. Just another example of how this story wrote itself. --;; This double chapter update might actually stretch into 3 chapter update!! I was actually hoping to have all the training stuff over and done with... looks like it's not gonna happen, huh?

Okay, I do have one question for everyone:

I've recently found out that 'Hyuuga' is actually spelt with a double 'u', however, I've always spelt it with just one. Is it okay for me to keep it that way or should I just change it to the official version?

I know it's a minor thing but I've got beta-readers saying I really should change it and I'm kinda lazy, I don't wanna change it... TT

If anyone is interested, I've got a gallery of sketches on the original characters and the Tenkun no buki uploaded onto my website. The address is: www.angelfire.com/anime3/karrafear/karrafearfantfiction/faithgallery.htm (without any of the spaces of course). Remember, it's 'HTM' not 'HTML'!!

Chapter 14

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter thirteen: Training Pt 2

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. This chapter's timeline will coincide with the previous chapters but it is mainly about Sakura and her training as well as a little snippet of Shikamaru at the end.

Sakura may seem very OOC so I'll just tell you all now that I WON'T be writing any SakuraXSasuke. She's slowly growing up and out of her infatuation with Sasuke, not to mention I didn't want her to slide back into her previous ways. I have nothing against SasuSaku, it's just that in this particular story, they don't match... --;; Shikamaru will also look slightly OOC too, so be warned.

Once again, I do NOT wish to hear any complaints about how SLOW I'm writing. I really AM doing the best I can, so please refrain from hounding me continuously.

=...= means "thoughts"

---- means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 13

Sakura walked sedately towards the front desk located on the entry foyer of the Konoha hospital. She had come to see how Sasuke was doing, as well as to talk to Kakashi about her subsequent training and Naruto's departure. "Excuse me," Sakura asked the nurse, "May I please have the number to Uchiha Sasuke's room?"

"Uh... I'm sorry but Sasuke-sama isn't being allowed any visitors at the moment..." The nurse answered demurely.

"What?!?, WHY NOT?!?" Sakura asked, suddenly afraid that something else had happened to her teammate.

"Uh... it's hard to explain..." The nurse continued when she was interrupted by another's voice.

"Sakura?" Kakashi asked as he rounded the corner and displayed himself in front of his only female student.

"Kakashi-sensei! What's wrong with Sasuke-kun? Why won't he be allowed any visitors? Has something else happened to him? Is he severely injured?" A stream of questions left Sakura's mouth as her anxiety built up, but she didn't give Kakashi enough time to answer even one question before she launched five more in its place. It wasn't until Kakashi raised his right hand in a sign of silence that Sakura finally quieten down.

"No, there's nothing wrong with Sasuke. He's not severely hurt. He'll be fine with a few days of rest. And as to why he's being kept away from everyone else, well, it's classified, so I can't tell you," Kakashi then leaned down to whisper into Sakura's ear, "But between you and me, I'll just say that it's... for his own good."

Sakura nodded numbly as she digested what Kakashi was trying to tell her. =That weird snake guy must be after Sasuke-kun again... I hope he's gonna be okay... God! I feel so useless again, being unable to help him and Naruto in that fight really bites. I don't ever want to be that weak again...= Sakura thought determinately, before she finally remembered what she needed to talk to Kakashi about.

"Ano... Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura looked up at him with slightly hopeful eyes and a small smile on her face. "Naruto said that he'll be undergoing his own training, probably with Jiraiya-sama. And since Sasuke-kun is hurt, would you be able to train me for the upcoming Chuunin Exam? I mean, I would really like to get stronger, since most of the people who are participating in the exam are already pretty strong too. I don't think I can compete..."

Sakura's smile slowly faded away as a troubled expression was present on Kakashi's face. "Actually Sakura... I won't be able to take care of your training. I have some other business to take care of and I won't have the time..." Kakashi drifted off as he shifted nervously looking at Sakura's despondent face.

"Ma... Ma... But I did find a very good replacement to look after your training. He's a better teacher than I am, really..." Kakashi tried to cheer Sakura up.

Sakura perked up a bit. "Yeah...Who?" =I wonder if this person is really strong or not... Will he be able to help me?..=

"It's me!" An unknown voice spoke up behind Sakura.

She turned around only to see a strange looking Shinobi. He was probably in his late twenties, wearing all dark blue attire (jumper, pants, even his bandana) as well as a pair of round sunglasses. Sakura blinked and sweat dropped. =This is the guy that's supposed to take over my training...= She thought, completely unconvinced.

=MY GOD!!! He NEEDS a fashion sense!!!= Inner Sakura screamed at the top of her lungs.

"Ah. Sakura, this is Ebisu-sensei. He's a special Jounin. He specialises in tutoring the elite students of Konoha. It's actually quite a privilege to have him teaching you." Kakashi babbled as if he knew exactly what was going through Sakura's mind, and tried to make Ebisu out to be more impressive than he was.

Sakura still didn't look very impressed but decided to give the guy the benefit of the doubt and looked back at Kakashi. "Um... Kakashi-sensei, does this mean I won't be able to visit Sasuke-kun at all?" She asked in a quiet voice.

Kakashi sighed and scratched the back of his head. "Well... I really don't know. He won't be able to take any visitors for a while yet..." =That's because he's being guarded by over 10 ANBU guards 24 hours a day...= Kakashi thought as he watched Sakura's expression carefully, analysing every twitch of her eyebrows and the biting of her lip. To his surprise, she didn't push the issue any further. Normally, she would have continued to argue against him, telling him that she needed to stay by Sasuke's side, just in case he awoke or something; but the Sakura that stood in front of him now, doesn't seem to be that upset about the arrangement. =Disappointed, yes; hurt, yes; but not overly upset that she wouldn't be able to see Sasuke as often as before.=

Unbeknownst to Kakashi, Sakura was having an internal battle with herself. =What's wrong with me...= After hearing that Kakashi would be spending the entire one-month period away from her, she had already realised that his 'business' probably had to do with training Sasuke-kun alone. Sakura was feeling agitated and hurt, but not for the same reasons as she would have in the past. Instead of feeling left out and disappointed because she couldn't spend more time with Sasuke-kun, Sakura was actually feeling a tiny bit of jealousy and anger at Kakashi for choosing to train him instead of her. Logically, she could understand why Kakashi was the best choice to teach Sasuke, especially since he's the only one in the village that knows how to handle the Sharingan. But still, it gnawed at Sakura that she was considered second-rate when compared to Sasuke-kun.

=I may be weaker than him... but that doesn't mean I'm a pushover!!!= Sakura thought vehemently. She couldn't understand why Kakashi would willingly push her away like this and completely favour Sasuke-kun instead. =I have my own strengths, don't I?= Sakura asked herself.

=HELL YEAH!! I'M NOT WEAK!!!!= Inner Sakura cheered loudly inside Sakura's mind. =I'LL SHOW HIM WHAT I'M MADE OF!!!!= She continued to cheer as she mentally punched harshly in every direction to emphasize her point.

Shaking her head to clear all her random thoughts, Sakura looked back up at Kakashi's face and finally surrendered to the inevitable. =I will grow strong... I won't stand aside and let people protect me like I'm a weak little girl anymore. I don't want to relive the situation I had in the forest of death. I'll show Kakashi-sensei, Sasuke-kun and Naruto-kun. I'll show them all that I'm a team player too. I'll show them what I'm worth!= She thought fervently.

Looking back up at Kakashi's slightly nervous expression and Ebisu's indifferent one, she finally accepted her fate. "I understand, Kakashi-sensei. I'll do my best..." She murmured half-heartedly.

With all the introductions completed, Sakura started leaving the hospital following her new sensei, Ebisu. However, just before the sliding doors closed behind her, Sakura threw another look over her shoulder and gazed sternly at Kakashi's retreating back. =I'll show you what I'm worth...=

That first day of training was not at all what Sakura had expected, and she wasn't very happy about her so-called 'elite' tutor either.

It had started out pretty okay. Ebisu had taken her to a near by river and had taught her how to walk on water. It wasn't that hard considering she had always been very adept at moulding and controlling chakra, so it only took her around 2 and a half tries to figure every thing out. After that, they had spent the next hour trying to run, jump and fight on the moving water's surface. Ebisu said that this exercise had to be done for several reasons. One: to gauge how well she was at Taijutsu, Ninjutsu and Genjutsu; two, due to the fact that she had to constantly balance herself while on the moving water's surface and fighting her sensei at the same time, she had to learn how to divide her concentration and focus.

After the trial fights were over, Ebisu was quiet impressed with Sakura's overall performance. He had discovered that she had very high potential in Genjutsu, but was only above average in strength when it comes to Taijutsu and Ninjutsu. Sakura's own concentration and focus had rapidly improved as she quickly adapted into the new fighting styles, with much more ease than Ebisu had expected. She had also surprised him with specials jutsus and techniques that he had never even heard of before, namely the Chakra enhanced kunais and the Gen Bunshin no jutsu (Illusionary Replications).

When asked where she had learnt these techniques from, Sakura had replied that her teammate, Naruto, had taught her. Ebisu looked sceptical for a long moment afterwards and it took her some time to convince him that Naruto was a really good friend and teammate, as well as a good teacher and influence too. In the end, he took her word as truth though he still looked slightly suspicious.

However, all good things had to come to an end. It was then that a young village girl (in her early twenties) accidentally stumbled upon their training ground, interrupting Sakura's training. Immediately, Ebisu had changed from being simply an 'elite' tutor to a closet pervert/gentlemen trying to subtly flirt with the village girl and insisting he should help her carry her laundry and such.

Eyebrows twitching, Sakura had shouted at him, asking what about her training. Ebisu had simply answered back that it was a man's duty to help any damsel in distress (even though the village girl was completely unharmed and in no danger anyways). Ebisu then followed up by telling her to finish the days' lessen by doing a hundred push-ups and then going home. Sakura fumed silently as she watched her supposed teacher walking away chatting merrily with the oblivious village girl.

Even though Sakura was angry at how she was dumped by her replacement teacher, she still did as she was told, being the obedient student that she was. After finishing the push-ups (which had become one of her more prominent exercising routines at home), she opted to go to the hospital instead of heading home.

Returning to the Hidden Leaf village, Sakura wandered around the streets aimlessly. Her mind was still unable to understand why she had reacted the way she did towards Kakashi's news and Ebisu's behaviour. If Sakura compared the way she acts and thinks now, to the way she had acted when she had just become a Genin, it was surprising to her how much she had changed. It wasn't just the physical changes (building muscles); she had also become far more mature and confident in herself.

The old Sakura wouldn't have battered an eye at Ebisu's seeming flirtatiousness. Oh, she would have complained, most definitely, but she wouldn't have felt disappointed that the training session was cut short. The old Sakura would have hammered Kakashi none stop until he gave up and promised to train both her and Sasuke together just so that it was the two of them together, not feel angry at being put aside because the teacher favoured one student among the three of them. She couldn't understand why she had changed so much in such a short amount of time, so Sakura decided to review everything that had happened to her since becoming a Genin.

She had first met Naruto when they were waiting for the name list for team 7 and she hadn't really thought much about him except that he was quiet, antisocial and probably annoying. She had also met Kakashi, and her first impression of him was less than favourable too. In fact, during the first few weeks of being part of team 7, anything that didn't have to do with Sasuke, she had ignored completely. She hadn't even helped Sasuke and Naruto capture any of the bells in the first place, all she had done was faint. =Damn... What a good impression that must have made...= She thought to herself sarcastically.

Then there was the mission to the Wave country. =Yes... that was the mission that changed my life...= Sakura thought. After watching how helpless she had been in protecting Tazuna-san against the Demon Brothers and the first time they had met Zabuza, Sakura truly felt as if she was worthless, useless to the cause. Of course at the

time, she had always believed that Sasuke-kun would come to her rescue if she were ever truly in danger. =What a moronic fool I was back then...= Sakura thought to herself sadly as she remembered how Naruto had stripped her of her ego so easily.

[FLASHBACK] From chapter 2

"You have no right to call yourself a Shinobi." Sakura blinked in shock at his announcement and was about to rebuff when he interrupted again. "You have been nothing but a burden on your teacher and classmates. You have done nothing to earn the title of Shinobi. Until you earn the right to bare that title, you are nothing, Haruno-san. Nothing but a waste of space and time."

[END FLASHBACK]

=Naruto certainly doesn't mince words... He just told me the truth without sugar coating it.= That had been the turning point for her, Sakura thought. It was at that moment in time when she started 'wanting' to become stronger, to become better than before, to force herself to concentrate on other, more important things. The two weeks of intensive training had done wonders for her, physically and mentally. =I started feeling a lot more confident about myself.= Sakura thought as she remembered all those sparring matches she had with Sasuke. =I really thought I was catching up to Sasuke-kun and Naruto-kun. I thought that I had finally become an equal...= Then came the actual fight with Zabuza and once again, Sakura had stayed in the sidelines, though she had an important task to perform as well - protecting Tazuna-san.

=I thought I had lost Sasuke-kun... = Sakura remembered how she had cried out in joy at seeing her crush alive and well. =And then, Naruto was the one who collapsed... because of the Tenkun no buki...= Sakura may not have voiced her opinions, but in truth, she hated the Tenkun no buki weapons. Every time Naruto had dared to use one of them, he was rendered more hurt and injured than ever before. First was against Haku and then in the Chuunin Exam against Orochimaru. She knew it must have been another Tenkun no

buki, or else Naruto would never have managed to fight evenly against one of three Sennins in such a manner. She hated how each time Naruto would have to sacrifice more of himself just to use the damn things. She simply hated the dreaded weapon, no matter how powerful it was.

=The Chuunin Exam...= Sakura smiled slightly at remembering all the ups and downs they have had with the first test. =It's where I first met Lee-san...= At the mention of the name, Sakura stopped walking abruptly. =I should visit him at least.= Looking around at where her mindless walking at led she, she found it ironic that she was standing outside of Yamanaka's Flower shop, the shop owned by Ino's parents.

Deciding she might as well go in since she's here now, Sakura walked into the shop without hesitation. That is, until the voice of her rival startled her. "It's rare to see you buying flowers from our shop." Ino's voice rang out behind her.

Hesitant, Sakura slowly turned around to face her one time friend and now rival, mind wondering how she should act around the other girl now. =Shit! Would she hate me? Are we still rivals? Is she going to kick me out just because I beat her??= Questions continued to scroll inside her head without any answers in sight and Sakura gave Ino a tentative bow of respect before deciding it would be best to leave before any explosion happen between the two.

Just before she was able to make it out of the shop though, her arm was grabbed firmly by Ino and she was roughly dragged back into the shop. "Now **What** the hell was that?! Is that anyway to treat your rival!!??" Ino yelled angrily at the pink haired girl.

Sakura gazed at the other girl with wide, confused eyes, and Ino frowned in response. "Just because you beat me in one battle, I repeat 'ONE' battle, doesn't mean you win the war! I'm still your rival Sakura, and I swear that next time I WON'T LOSE TO YOU!!!" Ino screamed and Sakura flinched but a small smile was finally displayed on her face.

Feeling more confident, Sakura replied back smugly. "Really, then I guess I'll just have to beat you again." Her tentative smile turned into a smirk at Ino's outraged expression. =Good. At least we're back to what we were before.= Though Sakura never admitted to anyone, especially Ino, but her rivalry with her one time friend was still precious to her. Even though she had beaten Ino in the previous fight, Sakura still saw Ino as her eternal rival, someone to aspire to...someone to run after.

Turning back to the flowers on display, Sakura decided on the perfect gift. "I would like one of these Daffodils please, without the roots of course." Sakura directed.

"Hm? If it was me going to see Sasuke-kun, I'd personally go for a 'rose' for love." Ino taunted while cutting off the Daffodil as requested.

Sakura's smile faded. "It's not for Sasuke-kun." Ino looked at her in confusion so she decided to explain. "It's for Lee-san. Sasuke-kun isn't taking any visitors, and I doubt he'll be staying in the hospital for long, knowing him." Sakura murmured in a slightly depressed tone of voice.

Ino looked at her in shock, and then she displayed a sad expression on her face. "Ne... Sakura...Did you hear about Lee-san?" She asked.

Sakura looked at her also with a gloomy expression in her eyes. "Yeah, I've heard. The doctors say that Lee-san will never be able to live as a Shinobi again..."

Trying to let go of the depressing atmosphere, Sakura decided it was high time to leave. She paid for the single Daffodil silently then left without another pause. A few minutes of walking alone to the hospital, Sakura was surprised when Ino suddenly appeared beside her.

Ino smiled encouragingly at Sakura's confused expression. "I'll go with you to visit Lee-san. I may not know him very well, but I do feel sorry for him." And so, both girls walked towards the hospital in comfortable silence.

Upon reaching the hospital though, both girls stopped abruptly as they heard a commotion originating from somewhere in the gardens.

"Lee-kun! Stop this! Your body isn't ready for this kind of stress!!" A female voice rang out from the middle of the garden.

Hearing the name, Sakura quickly rushed off towards the origin of the sound. Upon reaching the garden's clearing though, Sakura stopped hastily and gazed on with wide eyes filled with sympathy, shock and admiration all at the same time. Ino stumbled to a stop next to Sakura (having to catch up to the fast girl), following Sakura's intent gaze; she too, stood still and watched the scene in silent horror.

Lee was performing one-handed push-ups with his good arm while his severely injured left one was still bandaged heavily. With each push of his arm and elbow, Lee's body shuddered in fatigue and stress, sweating profusely at the strain of movement. Gasping through his haggard breath, Lee grunted out the number of push-ups slowly while he was doing them. "198....199..." With a final yelp of pain, Lee collapsed onto the ground, falling immediately into unconsciousness as the exhaustion finally set in.

"Lee-kun!" The nearby nurse yelled.

"LEE-san!!" Sakura yelled and all three females rushed to Lee's side to check his vitals.

After confirming his steady breathing, the nurse quickly ordered the other girls to stay with him while she went and called for a doctor. The two girls readily agreed.

Once the nurse was gone, Sakura looked upon Lee's unconscious form and smiled sadly. "You know, Ino... I've always wondered why boys... try so hard..." A small tear slid down Sakura's right cheek and Ino stayed silent for a time, contemplating the statement.

"I don't know, Sakura... I'm just a girl... I don't know..." Ino finally replied in a soft voice.

"I do." Sakura's calm voice interrupted. Ino looked up at Sakura in shock. No longer was Sakura looking sympathetic with a sad expression on her face, the Sakura that sat in front of her now had a very determined glint in her eyes, her mouth was set in a thin line and she had already wiped away the stray tears.

"Why?" Ino questioned, wondering at the changes happening with Sakura.

"Because... they want to be strong... strong enough to be acknowledged, strong enough to prove their worth... strong enough to protect the people they love..." Sakura explained slowly, her eyes glazed slightly as if she was seeing things far away from here. "Lee-san, Sasuke-kun, Naruto-kun... even Haku-kun... all had their reasons to want to become stronger..." After a short pause, Sakura finally realised. "We should do the same too."

Her musings were cut short when many other nurses and doctors appeared on the scene, carrying Lee's body off on a stretcher, leaving the girls to ponder on their own what they should do from now on. Silently, Sakura followed, with Ino by her side towards Lee's room. She dropped her daffodil off in a small vase and left the sleeping boy's side as it was time to head home. Along the way, Ino too left on her way home, leaving Sakura to brood over many issues silently in her own mind. It was later that night that Sakura finally decided she should take matters into her own hands if she wanted any real results.

The next morning found Sakura heading to the hospital for the third time in less than two days. She quickly approached the nurse on the front desk. "Excuse me. Can you tell me where the medic ninja named Haku is at the moment?"

Looking over the day's notes, the nurse behind the counter replied that he should be in the Southern wing of the hospital somewhere, watching over some of his patients. Sakura nodded, thanked the nurse and left.

Upon reaching the southern wing of the Konoha hospital, it didn't take Sakura long to find Haku at all, since the said Shinobi was having a break sitting on a bench located in the middle of the corridor.

"Haku-san!" called Sakura as she reached his side.

Haku smiled at Sakura, surprised at this impromptu visit. "Ohayo! Sakura-san! What brings you here?" Haku asked the slightly panting girl.

Sakura blushed slightly and shifted nervously on her toes. "Ano... I was kinda hoping that..." Sakura paused in mid-speech before she launched straight into her question, puppy dog eyes out in full force trying to convince Haku to agree. "That you could help me out with my training?"

Haku blinked. "You want *me* to train you? What happened to Kakashi-san?" Haku asked curiously, wondering why she would come to him of all people.

Sakura's shoulders slumped at the mention of the name. "Kakashi-sensei is busy training Sasuke-kun. And Naruto has gone on his own training expedition, probably with Jiraiya-sama. So that leaves me alone."

Haku frowned. "Kakashi-san doesn't strike me as the type of person to keep people hanging like that though. He must have organised

someone to teach you, right?"

One of Sakura's eyebrows arched upwards as her mind wandered for a bit. =Not let people hang?! HA! That bastard makes us wait three hours for him to even SHOW UP for every mission or training session!= Inner Sakura snorted ironically, but outer Sakura shrugged her shoulders again. "Well, Kakashi-sensei did ask Ebisu-san to take over my training for the one-month period. But I just don't like that guy! He's a pervert, though he doesn't admit to it. And he hasn't taught me a single thing yesterday at all! Hell, he walked off after seeing a pretty village girl stumble into our training session!!" Sakura continued to complain and list out all the bad points of this teacher, until Haku held both hands up in a sign of surrender.

"Okay! Okay!! Sakura-san! I'll see what I can do for you, is that all right? But I can't promise anything either. If there are emergencies, then my first priority is the hospital and my patients. Not to mention, I probably only have a few half day breaks during the week where I can teach you because I too, need to work for a living. Most of the time, you'll still be on your own." Haku stated out the conditions and Sakura quickly nodded in return, happy to have at least someone she respected teach her.

"Hm..." Haku tapped on his fingers as he thought to himself what type of training he should give her. "From what I remember of seeing you fight in the Wave country and what ever little tibits that Naruto actually told me about your strengths and weaknesses, I'll just assume that you still have a rather small Chakra reserve. You have high potential for Genjutsu, above average for Ninjutsu and average for Taijutsu, am I correct?" Haku asked.

Sakura grimaced slightly at all her weaknesses. "Well... pretty much. That's what Ebisu-san said about me yesterday too. Kakashi-sensei has been concentrating on teaching me Genjutsu skills, but they're not very strong though. He taught me how to do the Kyousei Suimin no Jutsu (Forced Sleep Technique), the Nemuri (Sleep) (1)..."

"Wait a minute, aren't the Kyousei Suimin no Jutsu and the Nemuri the same kind of jutsu?" Asked Haku curiously, having never learnt the differences between the two sleep Genjutsu.

"Well... yes and no. They both forces the victim into a deep slumber but the Nemuri Genjutsu is weaker because it can be cancelled with using the 'Kai' seal, while the Kyousei Suimin no jutsu is unable to be cancelled. You just have to wait until its effects wear off on its own. However, the Kyousei Suimin no jutsu can't be used for a long period of time. Unlike the Nemuri which can stretch to however long, the Kyousei Suimin has a limit of 1 full day at its absolute maximum." Explained Sakura.

Haku nodded in contemplation. "Okay. I get it. Go on." He stated as his mind mulled what else she had learnt.

"Naruto taught me how to do the Gen-Bunshin no Jutsu (Illusionary Replication technique) and the special Invisibility Genjutsu that I can place on myself and one other person. Kakashi had taught me one other high level Genjutsu called the 'Kishibari no Jutsu' (Tree Binding Technique) (2) Other than that, I haven't learnt much else." Said Sakura despondently.

"Okay, I've got it." Haku exclaimed as he thought through exactly what he could do for the younger Genin within the time period of one-month. "There really aren't many Ninjutsu or Genjutsu skills I can teach you, because most of my techniques are Mist Jutsus that either coincide with my Bloodline limit or are too Chakra-consuming for you to preform anyway. So this is what I can offer you, Sakura-san. I can teach you how to use metal-needles to the best of your ability. They're very light and have little to no residence in the air when thrown. With practice, you can learn to wield them better than kunais, I promise you that. I can also teach you about the human anatomy, so that you can aim for the weakest areas with much more accuracy. I think I can probably teach you how to perform the high level Genjutsu technique called 'Mukaku no jutsu' (Blind Senses Technique) (3)." Haku said as he continued to list down what was appropriate to teach and what wasn't in his mind.

"What's the Mukaku no Jutsu (Blind Senses Technique)?" Sakura asked.

"It's a Genjutsu technique that attacks all five senses of a human body and shuts them down for a very short period of time. Basically, it renders the person blind, deaf, numb to whatever their touch, unable to smell and without any taste buds at all for a maximum period of 15 minutes. To them, it'll feel like they are in some kind of vacuum, moving and yet not feeling anything at all. I know it sounds like a very short time span, but if you consider using it in a fight, 15 minutes could mean a person's death. It is a very Chakra consuming technique if you want to make it last but it also requires precise chakra control on the user's part, and another disadvantage is that it's a slow moving jutsu."

Sakura contemplated all that Haku had said and she finally nodded in acceptance at the terms and conditions. "But what about Taijutsu?" She suddenly asked, having remembered that Haku never implied anything about teaching her any physical attacks.

Haku gave her a crooked smile. "I don't think I have the time to teach you all about Taijutsu. Not to mention, I myself was never such a good Taijutsu expert anyway, I'm just good at speed, that's all."

"Oh..." Sakura said as her shoulders sagged again. She had really hoped Haku could help her with her Taijutsu.

"However, I can think of one person who would be a good teacher in Taijutsu. In fact, it's probably the only thing he's good at. And he has plenty of time on his hands to help you." Haku smiled brighter. Sakura didn't notice the glint in his eyes, if she had, she would have been more suspicious.

"Really! Who?" Sakura exclaimed, hope rekindled.

A few minutes later, Sakura found herself standing next to Haku, watching him talk to Lee-san about helping her with her Taijutsu.

"Of course I'll help! I've got nothing else to do and I'd love to be able to help train Sakura-san!" Lee exclaimed happily, performing his 'Hero' pose with a bandaged arm and several bandages on his face while he smiled as wide as he could. Sakura only sweat dropped, but figured she could do worse. =Yeah. At least it's not Gai...= Sakura physically shuddered at imagining herself being taught by Gai. =At least Lee-san isn't as bad... I hope...=

The next day, Sakura had informed Ebisu of the changes to her training arrangement and after a short talk with Haku, he finally agreed to leave her training in the medic Nin's hands.

For the next four weeks, Sakura's training session had steadily become heavier and heavier. Only two days after Sakura started training under both the tutelage of Haku and Lee, Ino suddenly showed up and demanded that she be trained as well. Her reasons: "I won't lose to Sakura again!" Haku decided that it wouldn't be so bad to train both girls at the same time, considering their rivalry; they would probably push each other to their limits and more. And indeed, that was what happened.

Each day, they had to practice many exercise routines as 'warm-up' before Lee oversees their Taijutsu training. These may range from 500 rope jumps, to 200 push-ups to 1000 sit-ups or more, all done with small weights strapped to their arms and legs to increase the difficulty of movement and increase their stamina. After that came the punching and kicking exercises where both Sakura and Ino had to perform over 500 punches and kicks within relatively high speeds. They were timed too.

When they eventually finished their daily practice sessions, they would then engage in one-on-one combat between the two girls to see how much they have improved. It was always a very evenly matched fight when no Genjutsu or Ninjutsu were employed. Sakura had exceptional skill with chakra control and therefore was able to perform short bursts of speed and power whenever she needed it. While Ino on the other hand, was physically stronger and she had a

natural grace and fast reaction time able to counter all of Sakura's attacks.

During the days when Haku had breaks in between his checkups on patients, he would come over to help train both girls in the arts of the medical ninjas. He hadn't taught them any true medic-nin techniques, just more about the human anatomy and where most of the weak spots are on a human body. He had also trained Sakura on the proper use of needles, not just for throwing, but also as small hand held weapons. For Ino, he concentrated on sword style techniques instead. Unbeknownst to most people, Haku was also very adept at using a sword (since Zabuza had always been a swordsman too), but he had never carried a real sword around because he could always make one out of water or ice instead.

As the training continued through the days and weeks, Ino and Sakura steadily grew in strength but were always on par with one another. While Sakura had learned many different attack patterns from Naruto, Sasuke and Kakashi, Ino had more ingenuity and came up with a few original combinations of attacks. All in all, they both enjoyed fighting each other as rivals but they would never admit it to themselves, let alone each other.

As for the Ninjutsu and Genjutsu training, Sakura had slowly but surely mastered the new Mukaku no jutsu (Blind Senses), as taught by Haku, as well as any of her previously learnt jutsus such as the Invisibility Jutsu, Gen Bunshins (Illusionary Bunshins), Kyousei Suimin (Forced Sleep), Kishibari no Jutsu (Tree binding) and the Chakra enhanced kunais or needles. Ino had mainly focused on learning her own family techniques and was experimenting on a new, original jutsu that she had been concentrating on making. She too, had also learnt how to enhance her sword (one she bought) with her own Chakra, making it sharper and stronger than before.

Overall, by the end of the one-month period, both Sakura and Ino were very happy about their improvements in ninja skills. Whether she becomes a Chuunin or not was no longer her main goal, Sakura just wanted the world to know that she had become stronger and will

continue to pursue strength. She wanted to become strong enough for her to be acknowledged as a worthy Shinobi as well as gaining enough power to protect her loved ones. She never wanted to be involved in another situation like the Chuunin Exam against Orochimaru, where she was close to worthless again.

The other Leaf participants of the Final Chuunin Exam were also busy training to become stronger, some more reluctantly than others. Shikamaru had spent days and days being either tortured by his Sensei or by his parents. He felt slightly betrayed by his best friend, knowing that Chouji would do anything for a free lunch, even if it meant helping Asuma-sensei torture poor Shikamaru.

Shikamaru gave a heavy sigh as he looked up towards the clouds once again. "How troublesome..." =How I wish I was a cloud, floating in the unending sky. No worries, no responsibilities...= He thought until he was brought of his musings by an unfamiliar shadow overcasting his eyes. =Eh... Who's that...= Shikamaru slowly turned his head towards the stranger.

A man, whose face was completely covered in bandages and wore black all over stood before him. "Are you Nara Shikamaru?" The man's soft and calm voice asked.

Shikamaru blinked but gave a short nod in reply; voicing his affirmation was too much trouble anyway.

The stranger's emerald green eyes gazed avidly into Shikamaru's nonchalant ones, as if analysing the Genin's very soul before also giving a short nod, as if in acceptance. "I am Kaga." Shikamaru raised one delicate eyebrow, as if silently asking the man why he should care.

Underneath the bandages, Kaga smirked. "I want to teach you a special jutsu. That's all." Shikamaru's other eyebrow rose to his hairline, again, asking again without words why he should care.

"Have you ever tried walking through shadows?" Kaga asked.

Shikamaru blinked. "What are you talking about?" He drowsily asked.

"If I told you, you had the ability to walk through shadows. Would you like to learn how?" The stranger detailed. (4)

"And why should I want to learn such a technique from someone like you?" Shikamaru battered back, suspicious written on his face.

"Because I am the only one who can teach it to you." Kaga answered simply.

"Who are you?" Shikamaru narrowed his eyes at the stranger. "You're not a leaf Shinobi." He stated the obvious as the man wasn't wearing any head protectors at all.

Kaga nodded in acknowledgement. "I am known as Kaga, the last of the shadow masters." At this point, both Shikamaru's eyes widen in surprise. "I am a Shinobi of the Air, here to accompany my mistress, the Lady Oracle at the public event of the Chuunin Exam."

"The Hidden Village of Air? Why?" Shikamaru whispered his questions, as the awe of seeing a real shadow master alive was still too shocking to accept.

"To watch Naruto-sama's fight, of course." The man stated simply, as if it was obvious.

Shikamaru's eyes narrowed in confusion again. "What does this have to do with Naruto?" He demanded.

"Naruto-sama is an Air Shinobi. He will be fighting as a representative of the Air." Kaga explained, proudly.

"He IS?!!" Shikamaru jumped to his feet, blinking in astonishment at the man standing in front of him.

"Yes. He is. But let's not talk about that right now." Kaga interrupted, knowing that if he started on this conversation, they would never get to the part he wanted to engage in. "So, are you or are you not interested in learning this technique?" He brought the conversation back to the original topic at hand.

After a long pause in silence, Shikamaru finally sighed, shoulders slumping in defeat though there was a clear glint of anticipation in his eyes. "How troublesome... Guess I might as well see what this technique entails..." He grumbled as he looked back up at the strange man. "So... What's it called anyway?"

"The Kage Michi (Way of the Shadows) (5) - The first stage in creating your own Akukan (Space) (6)" Kaga said smugly while Shikamaru blinked. =Damn... Looks like I just made it more troublesome...= Shikamaru sighed internally.

(1) First used by Kabuto in the Chuunin exam - he places his hand on a person's shoulder (the person sitting in front of him) and forces them to sleep.

(2) Used by Kurenai against Itachi in chapter 141.

(3) Original Jutsu. Mu means 'nothing or void', while Kaku is short for Kankaku which means the human 'senses' (ie. Smell, touch, taste, sight and sound).

(4) This jutsu's idea was originally inspired by the abilities of one of the characters in the manga Houshin Engi (I LOVE Outenkun-sama!!!). He doesn't actually use 'shadows' but he can create his own 'shadow-space' or 'mirror' in which he can travel through like a teleportation jutsu. It seems that this idea was also incorporated into the story of There Where When is Now Book 2 by TokehGecko. That's why I'm writing a disclaimer here. I don't own the idea but I didn't exactly steal it from TokehGecko, if it seems that way, then I apologies profusely to anyone confused.

(5) 'Kage' means 'shadows'. Michi means 'way/path/understanding', in Chinese it is called the 'Dao' or 'Tao', a Taoist philosophy on the 'way of life'. In this story, it just means 'a way to travel through shadows.'

(6) Completely copied off Houshin Engi, it's a technique used by all the Juttenkuns (10 Warriors), including my favourite Outenkun. Aku - 'Kong' in Chinese, means empty/hollow/void/blank, or air/space. Kan - 'Jian' in Chinese, means between/among. Together, Akukan ('Kong Jian' in Chinese) means 'space' or 'area'.

Wow! Sakura has really grown up. And so is Ino. I've told you guys before how much I hated how infatuated Sakura acted in the original series. Here, she's a lot more likable. oo

I didn't really plan to have that bit about Kaga teaching Shikamaru. In fact, I didn't even know I would be until it until my fingers reached the keyboard. Another example of how this story wrote itself, I swear... OO;; Oh well. It gives the overall story a little twist. I like it! Hope you like it too! Looks like Shika-kun's going to be stronger too.

The next chapter will be back to Naruto's training with Ruri. Stay tune and remember to REVIEW!!!

If anyone is interested, I've got a gallery of sketches on the original characters and the Tenkun no buki uploaded onto my website. The address is: w w w. (without any of the spaces of course). Remember, it's 'HTM' not 'HTML'!!

Chapter 15

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the genin test. Chapter fourteen: Training Pt 3

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. SWEARING!! Back to Naruto's training. Timeline set AFTER chapter 12. Basically it is set after Naruto had his vision of Gaara and he met his Aunt again. I know I said it was suppose to be a double chapter update... Well.. it turned out to be a TRIPLE chapter update instead. So I hope all of you are HAPPY! Answers to the mysteries of the Tenkun no Buki, the hidden Air Village and the Uzumaki clan are HERE!!!

I also want to thank Insanity for creating the new technique 'Tenshi no Doki' for me. Arigato Gozaimasu

=...= means "thoughts"

---- means "time passed" or "different perspective" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Chapter 14

Naruto lay tiredly on the soft grass of an open meadow, watching the clouds slowly move across the blue sky above him. His breath was no longer panting and his body no longer hurt, all due to the demonic

chakra of his body's other resident, but he would never openly thank the Kyuubi for its healing abilities.

It had been a week since his last encounter with his Aunt on top of the fourth Hokage's stone head but truthfully; he still hadn't completely recovered from that episode. It wasn't everyday you found out that there was another demon carrier like yourself that exist in this cruel world. In fact, he truly felt sorry for Gaara. The level of understanding due to shared experiences were bringing back a whole shit load of bad memories that Naruto would prefer to do without.

Hearing how Gaara's own father sent assassin after assassin to kill him reminded Naruto how close he, himself, had come to being strangled to death by his own nanny. Hell, they were even the same age at the time! Gaara's conscious acceptance of the demon inside and him embracing the joy of killing others prompted Naruto to remember how close he too, had been to give in to the Kyuubi's bloodlust, especially after the incident with Ellie.

Naruto considered himself very lucky that he didn't turn out the way Gaara did, if only because it was so easy to become the demon's shadow, all you really had to do was embrace it. Naruto pitied Gaara and sympathised with him at the same time. They were the same and yet, not the same. Naruto somehow found the strength to fight against the urge to kill others (or himself). He found the strength to trust others again; he learnt how to adapt and how to accept others into his own life. He learnt the true meaning of being an Uzumaki, and would do anything to make both his deceased parents proud.

Naruto blushed slightly as he remembered awakening in the arms of his Aunt the very next morning. Embarrassed about his outburst of emotion and his subsequent behaviour, Naruto had tried to pretend that the entire episode didn't happen but with one sentence, his Aunt was able to bring him back to the issue at hand.

[FLASHBACK]

"You are not him and you never will be." The Lady Oracle affirmed.

Naruto froze under the scrutiny of his Aunt's piercing gaze, not willing to go over the event of last night and yet knowing he needed some answers too. Finally, deciding that his curiosity won this round, Naruto asked: "Why didn't you tell me he was a demon carrier?"

"Would it have made a difference?" The lady asked, indifferently.

Naruto frowned slightly, as he was not satisfied with the answer but was unable to find anything to rebuff the argument either. "What else have you been hiding from me? Why are you really here?" He continued to ask.

Ruri sighed but straightened herself into a more dignified manner of an Uzumaki mistress. "There are three major events that will happen in the near future. Three events in which there is nothing you or I can do to change the outcome. As I have told you many times before, the future is NOT a straight line to be followed; there are many crossroads and pathways in which a person may choose his or her own destiny. In this sense, one's destiny is in one's hand, and sometimes, if one's will is strong enough, one may even be able to defy destiny, given the chance, of course. However, from my visions, I have seen three upcoming events that will not change, cannot be changed, and they would definitely have implications for everyone involved in the Chuunin Exams." She explained calmly, but still didn't answer his question completely.

"What are you hiding from me, Lady?" Naruto insisted. "What are these three events that will happen as dictated by fate?" Naruto was adamant about getting some answers and the Lady Oracle finally acquiesced.

"One, the Sound will invade the Leaf. Two, the third Hokage will die. Three, Shukaku would awaken. These are the three events I have foreseen." Ruri finally answered after a long pause.

Naruto's eyes widened at the implications. He was so shocked that his mouth opened and closed continuously without emitting any sound. Finally pulling out of his shocked paralysis, Naruto started thinking out loud to himself. "Then we must strengthen the Leaf's defences! We have to protect the Hokage! And we..."

"Once again, I ask you, Naruto. Would it have made a difference?" The Lady Oracle looked at Naruto with her piercing gaze once again, as if daring him to argue back.

Naruto took a deep breath, held it, and released it slowly, calming his racing heart as he thought over the events that would happen more thoroughly. He sighed. "I guess not, even if the Leaf were prepared, it wouldn't stop the Sound from trying to invade anyway. And if the enemy was strong enough to take out the Hokage, I doubt that there is anyone in the Leaf currently that would be strong enough to protect the Hokage's life. As for Shukaku... even Jiraiya would have problems against a real demon." He described as he analysed the situation methodically. "But that doesn't mean that we can just sit back and not do anything!" He finally exclaimed.

"We have already done what we can. I have informed your Hokage of the threat and it is up to them to fight their battles. Do not forget that you are an Air Nin, Naruto." Ruri emphasized. "Air Nins are innately NEUTRAL! We will NOT participate in the upcoming conflict, do you understand?" The Lady demanded in a low voice.

Naruto gulped as he realised he wouldn't be able to assist the Leafs at all, because the law of neutrality must be exhibited by all people associated with the Hidden Air village. If a person wearing an Air protector (as he would be during the actual Chuunin Exams) involved themselves in any of the outside conflicts, it would be seen as a sign of open war between the Air village and whichever opponents come their way.

Naruto bit his lip as the full impact of what his Aunt was trying to tell him finally hit home. He wouldn't be able to help his friends at all. Sakura, Sasuke, Kakashi, Haku, Konohamaru and so many others

that he had met along the way. He would be unable to help any of them if they were in trouble. The realisation hurt, it hurt in a way that Naruto never thought he would feel again. Helpless. Just as he had felt when he found Ellie's body.

Slowly, Naruto lowered his head in silent contemplation. "I don't think I can accept that." He whispered softly, almost hoping his Aunt didn't hear him.

"At least try." The Lady bit back.

After a long pause between the two Uzumaki's, Naruto finally resigned himself to his fate. "Is there anything I can do?" He asked in a quiet voice, pleading with his Aunt to understand that he wouldn't be able to sit aside and watch his friends die. Not again, never again.

Ruri closed her eyes while she voiced the only option left to him. "Train, Naruto. Train and become strong. Strong enough to defy destiny."

[END FLASHBACK]

And that had been exactly what Naruto had done for the past week. Training. He had spent every available minute (not required for any other necessary breaks - eating and sleeping) training himself to become stronger than he already was. With desperation and concern fuelling his body with unending energy, Naruto found that he seemed to be successfully pushing his concerns and emotions aside as he continued to train his Chakra control as well as his toad summoning technique.

It had been at the beginning of that week that Jiraiya had suggested Naruto start re-learning and perfecting his previous toad summons. Ever since his encounter with the Tenkun no bukis, Naruto had used Jiraiya's toad contracts less and less. As of now, his ability and skill to be able to use them had probably fallen into disarray. He had to relearn all the different toad's names, abilities and how much Chakra to use to summon them.

It took him a full week to learn all the necessary information on every single toad summons available to him, ranging from the smallest of toads (Gamakichi) to the largest and oldest of toads (Gamabunta). Naruto had done this by summoning them first, then challenging them to a short trial fight. This process of trial and error (though time consuming) had helped Naruto become accustomed to the different fighting styles of each toad as well as learning each of their special techniques and combo techniques. However, Gamabunta still didn't see him as much of a master, even though they felt a slight mutual respect for each other, knowing that Naruto is the son of the Fourth and the Uzumaki heir.

The week of training quickly flew by as Naruto steadily mastered his toad summons once again and occasionally practiced the precise chakra control exercises that had been instructed on the scroll given to him by Kaga previously. It had now been exactly three weeks since his training with Jiraiya had begun. This meant that from tomorrow onwards, he would be training under his Aunt and Kaga-san once again. =I wonder what Aunt Ruri is going to teach me...= Naruto thought as he continued to watch the clouds. =Oh, well... no point in dwelling on it now. I'll see what they're up to tomorrow.= As Naruto's body relaxed, his eyes slowly closed and he fell into a deep slumber, awaiting the sunlight of the morning to come through.

The next day found Naruto being escorted to the private training ground for elite Jounins. "The last part of the scroll said to take you here. Hell if I know what Ruri's got planned for you, kid, but to take you here... whatever she's planning on teaching must be some high-class stuff. The Jounins only come here to perfect their original jutsus or some very powerful techniques." Jiraiya explained, not at all alleviating Naruto's anxieties.

Upon reaching the clearing, they only found Ruri there, alone. Kaga was nowhere to be seen and that was already a very unusual event in itself, but what truly struck both Jiraiya and Naruto's surprise was what Ruri was wearing. For all of Naruto's previous training sessions

under Ruri and Kaga, it was Kaga that he actually fought against. Never had he been forced to face his own Aunt in a one-on-one battle before, so he had no idea how powerful she truly was. However, seeing as Ruri was currently wearing a battle Gi, it must mean that this time around, she's going to be physically training him, not just sitting by the sidelines and instructing him what to do. Naruto gulped.

"Jiraiya. You are no longer needed here." The Lady Oracle informed the Sennin without even turning around to face him. Jiraiya only replied with a raised eyebrow at the order, and shrugged at Naruto's desperate look, giving him a silent message: 'You're on your own, kid,' before leaving the clearing in a puff of smoke.

Naruto gulped nervously and turned his attention back towards his Aunt, just as she, herself, turned around to face him. "For the rest of the week until the start of the Chuunin Exam, we will both stay here. Kaga, who will visit us every morning, noon and night, will bring us food and other necessities. Other than that, we are to be completely isolated from the outside world." Ruri explained and Naruto nodded in comprehension. "For this week of training, we will be concentrating on the development of your bloodline limit technique, the Yochigan (Prediction's Eye) (1). Other than that, I will also teach you the advance Taijutsu style coupled with Ninjutsu Chakra manipulation, called the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) (2)."

All Naruto could do was silently nod in reply again, knowing that his Aunt would not appreciate it if he interrupted her explanations. "For now though, let's go through some general theory and history of both techniques." The Lady Oracle finalised as she turned around and took a seat on an uncomfortable looking rock, facing Naruto.

Naruto, following his Aunt's footsteps, found a spot directly in front of her and sat down unceremoniously, awaiting the theoretical and historical details as it is how he had learnt all of his previous Air techniques. The training sessions with Ruri and Kaga were always divided up into three sections; the first was always the theory and history of the techniques, followed by the practical exercises, once

the move was mastered, then comes the testing stage, where Naruto was pitted against Kaga to see how much he had improved and how he would find a way to incorporate the move into an actual battle.

"As you have learnt before, thousands of years ago, the world was dominated by Demons, and Animal spirits as well as Humans. As time progressed, the Demons were driven away by the establishments of Ninjas, while the animal spirits chose to merge with the spirit of the Earth instead of facing extinction by man. (3)" The Lady Oracle theorised as if she was a lecturer in class.

"The Hidden Air village was the first Shinobi village to be established because it was based on Mount Tenju (Heavenly Pearl) where a large amount of Chakra has been naturally stored up since being absorbed by the mountain for thousands of years prior. The people living in the Air Village had learnt a long time ago that the spiritual energy known as Chakra exists in all things living and non-living, and they were the first to learn how to harness it as a usable object." Ruri began like a storyteller, describing some fantasy-like narrative.

"At the time, the demons wrecked havoc on all human villages, ravaging and killing as they please due to their inherent bloodlust for chaos. For the sake of peace, the Uzumaki clan (the strongest clan within the Air Village at the time) decided to gather all the fighting clans in the world into a united front to confront the demons once and for all and drive them out of our realm of existence. The leader of the Uzumaki clan was a brilliant man, intelligent and powerful, probably as powerful as your Hokages. He set up the first academy to teach man the ways of harnessing Chakra and encouraged them to form their own styles of techniques - that's why there are so many different elemental specialists in the world now, such as fire for Konoha, water for the Mist, wind for the Sand and so on." Naruto had learnt a long time ago that whenever Ruri or Kaga started teaching history, it is best for him to listen. Not concentrating enough on the theory would only lead him to have more trouble with the practicals. Not to mention, these stories were always far more interesting than anything else he had read from books.

"While teaching the Shinobis how to fully manipulate and control their chakra, the Uzumaki leader was also doing research on how to better combat some of the stronger demons that exist in the world at that time. You may not know this, but there are four types of rank we have for demons. In the native language, what constitute as 'C' nowadays is the lowest type of demons found - they are ground dwellers, scavengers mainly and are easily hunted just using pitchforks. 'B' type demons have some special abilities that make them stronger, faster, and slightly deadlier than humans but not by much, if surrounded, these too, are pretty easy to deal with. The 'A' type demons are much stronger than their counterparts; these demons are slightly weaker in comparison to your summoning of 'Gamabunta'. The last type of demon class is known as the 'S' class, or the 'Destruction' Gods. These demons are called 'Gods' at the time because wherever they go, destruction follows and there is nothing that could stand in their way. Luckily, there weren't that many S-class demons to begin with, only two that history had ever recorded and the Kyuubi no Kitsune was one of them." Naruto blinked at the information he's been given. He'd always known that the Kyuubi was powerful but never thought that it was considered one of the MOST powerful of its kind.

"Then... if these demons no longer exist in the world, how come people can still do summoning no Jutsus? What's the difference between a summoning contract and the demons that once ruled the world?" Naruto asked, curious about the relationships between the two.

"The animal contract summons as used by Shinobis nowadays, were all originally animal spirits that develop a physical form through out the millenniums. They are different from demons because demons ultimately cannot be controlled or tamed, while a contract with an Animal spirit summon gives the Shinobi permission to ask for their help. Of course, you have to be worthy of the contract before you can even sign it." Ruri snorted in dislike, as she had never dealt with any animal contract summoning before. Dealing with summoning the

Tenkun no buki were already taking up most of her time, let alone other summons.

Shaking her head to clear all thoughts, Ruri then returned to the original subject they were talking about before being interrupted. "The Uzumaki leader had realised early on that even taking out an 'A' class demon was going to be very difficult to handle, let alone a 'S' class demon. And so, he formulated a new plan - he learnt of how to seal demons against their will. That is why the Uzumaki family are world renowned for their sealing jutsus nowadays. We've studied extensively and perfected almost every single Fuiin Jutsu (Sealing Technique) there is in the world, even those original seals, we should be able to crack. (4)" Ruri noted in a slightly proud and arrogant voice.

"As an experiment, he tried to seal an 'A' class demon he had accidentally captured into a weapon, a sword. The 'Yurei no Ken' (Spirit Sword) (5) was the first Tenkun no buki created by fusing a demon's very soul, it's very essence and life force, into an inanimate object." Ruri's voice drifted into sadness, while Naruto's eyes widened slightly at the truth behind the creation of the Tenkun no buki. "You see, that's how all the Tenkun no buki were created - by capturing an 'A' class demon and forcing it's spirit into a workable object, only to be used by humans against their own kind. The only exception is the 'Kakyu (Hollow Sphere), it's the only Tenkun no buki that does not have an active soul inside of it. (6)" She continued, still in the same sad tone.

Pausing for a short period of time to let the information sink in, Ruri took a deep breath and returned to her explanations. "After the creation of the tenth and final Tenkun no buki, the Kakyu, the Uzumaki leader finally realised that not everyone was capable of handling the Tenkun no buki without either going insane or dying as a result of using the weapons. Since it was his own blood that was used for the sealing ritual, he discovered that the side effects (of using a Tenkun no buki) do not affect him as much as the other users do. The same blood that runs in his veins also run within the

weapon's spirit, continuously making it easier for a Uzumaki to control the demonic weapon. It was after this discovery that the Uzumaki leader made a rule that only Uzumakis', his family members were allowed to handle the weapons at any one time. That's the only difference between us using it and other people using it. The blood that stains these weapons still recognises us as their rightful masters." Ruri noted in a sarcastic, ironic tone of voice.

"With the help of the Tenkun no buki - ten demonic weapons all wielded by Uzumaki clan warriors - all the demons were driven away from the Ningenkai (Human Realm) and into another dimension for demons, the Makai (Monster Realm) (7). Finally, peace was restored in the Ningenkai, or at least, that was what the leader thought at the time... How naïve." The Lady Oracle whispered the last words as if in reprimand for her own ancestor's actions.

A long silence lasted for a while until Naruto finally found the courage to inquire: "What does this have to do with the Yochigan (Prediction's eye)?" Knowing that the history lessons had more to do with the Uzumaki bloodline limit technique than the Taijutsu move.

"The Uzumaki leader was incredibly disappointed by how man's civilisation had crumbled once world wide peace was restored." Ruri said blankly as her mind was busy thinking about something else. "What was left of the multitude of Shinobi warriors all broke away and started a civil war over supremacy and land, the weak followed the strong and each group started setting up their own supposed 'kingdoms' or 'empires'. The Uzumaki leader, whose clan has been decimated until only a few members were left were not strong enough to stop the carnage caused by man in a world wide scale. All he could do was retreat from all the wars and the fighting, dedicating the rest of his life and the lives of his kinsmen to keep the dangerous Tenkun no buki's out of each and every warlord's hands. It was probably that vow that started the Uzumaki curse." Ruri finally shifted her gaze until she looked squarely at Naruto. "Do you know of the Uzumaki curse, Naruto?" She asked in a quiet voice.

Naruto nodded and started explaining what he understood.

"Traditionally, the Uzumaki clan has always been divided up into two houses, the main house and the branch house - or, as most people call them, the 'Prophet' house and the 'Breed' house. The 'Prophet' house consist of only one or two members - the oldest of the each generation - the current master training his or her heir to become the next 'master or mistress of prophecies', taking over the leadership of the entire Air village. While the 'Breed' house consisted of all the various siblings, cousins, Aunt and Uncles whose main purpose is to both protect the current 'prophet' and to produce the next heir - because the 'prophet' house is unable to reproduce unless they wish to lose their bloodline ability."

"It's all just a pack of lies to control the Uzumaki family so that we don't go on a rampage and use the Tenkun no buki against one another." The Lady Oracle snorted ironically. "As you may well know, I am of the 'Prophet' house while your mother is part of the 'Breed' house, just as my late Uncle was one of the 'Prophet's and my parents are of the 'Breed'. You, on the other hand, can be either 'Prophet' or 'Breed', since you're the **only** child of Yuuki. So have you decided which you would prefer to be? I'm giving you the choice I was never given." Ruri's stern gaze pierced Naruto's very soul as he picked up on all of her hidden anger, frustration and pain.

Naruto gulped. "I... I don't want to be either... If I become a 'Prophet', then I'm unable to wed and have a family. I'll be forever alone. But if I become a 'Breed', then my future kids will be locked in the Uzumaki curse. I don't want them to follow the traditions. I want them to be free..." He mumbled as he looked away from his Aunt's gaze. He knew he was breaking the rules, the very rules that were the foundations of the Uzumaki clan but he couldn't help speaking the truth towards his Aunt.

"Well said." Ruri muttered back in a calm voice and Naruto blinked in surprise. He had expected her to be outraged or angry, but never really thought she would accept his radical opinions.

"I completely agree." Ruri sighed in tiredness. "In fact, if it were my own choice, I wouldn't even have acknowledged you as my heir. But as fate would have it, the ruling council had already decided your destiny, with or without our consent. However, since you haven't signed the contract yet, you are still considered only an outside relative. A 'Breed' so to say... (8) Until the day you signed the contract and officially become my heir, you are simply a distant relative of which I must take some responsibility over." A short silence overlayed the two figures in the middle of the clearing.

"Anyway." Ruri coughed for attention before bring all her wandering thoughts back to the original topic at hand. "Ever since the original Uzumaki leader set up the rule that his future descendents have to guard the Tenkun no bukis so that it will not be misused, the rest of the Uzumaki line has been unable to be free of this responsibility. It's also a reason why the Air does not associate with other countries at all. Since then, every generation of the Uzumaki line has been trying to find a way to completely destroy the Tenkun no bukis once and for all, forever releasing their future descendents from this curse. After all those years of research, we have finally come up with one solution."

Naruto blinked, slightly shocked at what he heard. =You can destroy a Tenkun no buki??= He thought to himself but his muse were interrupted as Ruri continued with her story.

"One of our ancestors discovered that the only way to fully destroy a Tenkun no buki is to release the soul of the demon residing inside of it and force the spirit back into the Makai (Monster realm) of which all the other demons are locked away. However, this solution has problems in its own right. One, the gateway to the Makai realm is closed to us mortals for all time, since it was located on Mount Yomi (Hell) and that mountain had been destroyed by a volcano eruption ages ago. Two, we can't just release a demon like that and let it roam free in the Ningen world if we are unable to send it back to the Makai. Three, there isn't anyone here who's really strong enough to be able to release the demon and find a way to drive it away from

this dimension anyway." The Lady Oracle concluded with a slightly depressed tone of voice.

"That's why the Uzumaki's have spent eons learning how to manipulate time." Ruri stated quietly. Almost too quiet for Naruto to pick up, but he did. Naruto's eyes widened slightly at the implication of the comment and his mouth slowly opened and closed without any sound being emitted.

"We've been trying to find a way to send the Tenkun no buki and one other sacrifice into the past, to the old Mount Yomi and destroy it there..." Ruri paused to gather her breath. "That's why we have developed the bloodline limit ability to see into the future, the past and even came up with some original jutsus to actually *go to* the past. Generation after generation, we've been forcing our own bodies, our own metabolism to evolve into what it is today, all for the purpose of destroying the Tenkun no buki once and for all, to free ourselves from the mistakes of our predecessors." Ruri said in a soft, completely defeated voice.

"Time travel?!" Naruto squeaked, stuttering. "Is t...that even possible?"

Ruri only nodded and the two spent some time in complete silence. Naruto, because he had to absorb all the secrets that had been revealed about his bloodline and the Tenkun no buki; Ruri, because she had to fight her way out of the depressing reminder of her predestined fate.

"So... the Yochigan (Prediction's eye)..." Naruto mumbled, unable to form any full sentences yet.

"It's one of the bloodline limit abilities developed for the sole purpose of predicting time. The technique itself, started off as an experiment, one of our ancestors forced chakra into their eyes and started manipulating it just so that he could get a glimpse of what would happen a few seconds ahead of time. Over the generations, many of our ancestors either turned blind, insane or finally mastered the

technique. Eventually, it became a subconscious ability embedded into our bloodstreams, which is why our eyes evolve into a different colour when we use that technique. In your case, the ability usually activates within your dreams and it shows you bits and pieces of everything - namely your visions. That is, until recently, when you were able to select what you want to see and what you don't - it's a signal that you're ready to use the ability consciously instead of subconsciously now." Ruri continued to lecture on about the subject without showing any interest in her tone of voice, while Naruto only 'hm'ed in response, acknowledging that he had heard what she said.

"So, that's basically what the technique entails. Push a lot of Chakra into your eyes and learn how to manipulate it so that you start seeing a double image." Standing up, Ruri motioned for Naruto to follow her until they both stood in the middle of the clearing facing each other. "There is some important information you must know first, before we start any of the practical stuff."

Looking straight into Naruto's eyes and seeing the determination there, Ruri mentally conceded to teach him the technique. =For good or for evil, he has a right to know about his family's legacy.= She thought. "The Yochigan (Prediction's eye) can vary in ability depending on how trained the user is in manipulating it. It can see several seconds, minutes or even days ahead of an event, and so too, it can also see up to years into the past. It is up to the user to pinpoint exactly what they want to see and how. When activated, the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) creates a second image within your eyes that is juxtaposed next to the image of what is happening directly in front of you, so it is up to the user to distinguish between the two images. During a battle situation, the user can predict the moves of his opponents in the future as well as react to the attacks coming towards him now."

"As I said before, the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) is activated by pushing a lot of Charka into the eye sockets, so it is VERY chakra-consuming, meaning that you can't keep it up for long. Not to mention, it places a lot of stress on the user's mind to interpret

between the multiple images that both eyes are seeing at the same time. If you think the Hyuuga's Byakugan was confusing, this is even worse, and it drains more chakra than even the Sharingan. When reacting to an image of the future, our bodies (due to the same bloodline limit ability) automatically speeds up in correspondence to what we are seeing. It's a sub-conscious tactic that we cannot control - the body follows what we see." Naruto's whole attention was revoted to the words spoken from Ruri's lips. He knew that all these interesting little tibits were very important if he wanted to successfully master his bloodline limit technique.

"Once activated, the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) doesn't just show you **one** future. It shows you multiple futures, as in it will show you all the possibilities of the future. Every single variable is computed, analysed and the results shown to you, whatever you decide to do, the impacts of your decision will be known before you even take the action. It's a very stressing ability that takes up almost all of your mind's concentration just to interpret without getting an information overload." Ruri informed firmly, silently telling Naruto that he better be prepared or else.

Taking a deep breath, Ruri shut her eyes and concentrated, focusing her chakra into it while consciously activating the Yochigan (Prediction's eye). After a short period of time, she finally opened her eyes widely. Naruto was stunned by what he saw. Her eyes were still the same blue tone it had always been, just slightly brighter than usual as if it could glow in the dark. But what really surprised Naruto were the two golden rings within her blue iris swirling in perfect circles. The rings were bright gold in colour and continued to glow and shimmer even as Ruri continued to speak. "As you can see, when the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) is activated, our blue eyes glow slightly in the sunlight, and within our irises, either 2 or 3 gold rings are visible. (9)"

Ruri closed her eyes again and deactivated the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) while Naruto tried to find something to say even as he fought against the stunned silence that over took him. After a

few seconds of shifting, Ruri pulled a long piece of white cloth out of her pockets. Keeping her eyes firmly closed, she wrapped the cloth around her eyes and tied it at the back of her head. Naruto blinked but decided to keep quiet, knowing that his Aunt would explain herself soon enough.

Finished with tying the knot, Ruri finally answered his curiosity. "There are many side-effects to using the Yochigan (Prediction's eye). The first, most dangerous side-effect is that your eyes will become blind temporarily and it will bleed directly after usage." Naruto suddenly noted the red stains starting to emerge on the previous white cloth. "There is nothing we can do about this side-effect; we simply have to be careful about its uses. The bleeding and blindness is only temporarily, the amount of time you stay blind coincide with the amount of time the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) has been kept activated. If the bleeding does not stop after a maximum time period of one hour, then you better go to a medic ninja to have it checked out, because it could lead to permanent blindness."

"Another side effect of the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) is that it can also give the user a huge headache, especially if the user was low on Chakra in the first place. This is because during its use, the brain is put under a heavy strain, trying to keep all the different input images separate and interpreted into its appropriate streamlines. The user may suffer an information overload and in the long term, turn completely insane as a result. Not only that, the Yochigan (Prediction's eye) also places a lot of stress on the user's body due to its increased speed of reaction time to the images shown." Ruri finally concluded while the white cloth tied across her eyes was heavily stained with blood and there was also a small trail of blood running down Ruri's face. She wiped the trails off using her sleeve as if it were an everyday occurrence. Naruto could only swallow all the information in silence as he stared at his Aunt. =MY GOD!! THIS IS WHAT I WILL BE LEARNING???!!!= He thought with some trepidation.

After a short break for lunch, as provided by Kaga, Ruri's eyes had stopped bleeding completely and she was able to see again as if nothing had happened at all. The two of them decided that they should go over the theory for the second technique that Ruri was going to teach Naruto in the limited time they had left, the 'Tenshi no Doki' (Angel's Wraith).

"The Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) is very similar to your Rasengan so it shouldn't be too difficult to learn, especially since you've been practicing and improving your chakra control during the recent weeks of training." Ruri theorised. "While the Rasengan forms a perfect sphere of spinning chakra, the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) actually requires the chakra to spin continuously around a certain body part in order to strengthen it during a Taijutsu battle. The most common place to activate the Tenshi no Doki would be either on the palms of the hand or underneath your feet." She detailed the similarities and differences of the two techniques.

"By forming the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) directly underneath your feet and manipulating your chakra in such a way that you force the air itself to condense and spin under your body weight, you're actually able to make yourself hover for a few seconds off the ground. (10)" Ruri demonstrated while listing the effects of said technique. Naruto watched in awe as Ruri slowly but surely started floating off the ground and then stayed hovering off the earth's surface for a short amount of time before she finally released the technique slowly and landed lightly back on the solid ground again. While hovering in mid-air though, Naruto could literally feel the highly condensed air pressure being forced to swirl in a tight circle underneath his Aunt's feet - it like someone literally standing on a Rasengan.

"Most of the time, people use a Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) on their feet so that they can repel themselves off the ground with much more force than simply pushing off with Chakra. The height, distance and speed of your jumps can be increased by about 200% if used properly with the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith). That's why it's

such a useful technique when used with Taijutsu." Ruri gave a small smile as she too, enjoyed using the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) to hover off the ground - it gave her the feeling of being free and able to fly away.

Standing back on the solid ground, Ruri raised her right hand. "Using the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) upon the palm of your hands, you can create both a very powerful offensive attack as well as a strong defensive shield. Basically, you expel chakra from the opening points located on your arm, and then consciously controlling this released chakra to manipulate the air particles surrounding your palm and arms into swirling directly around said appendage, either spinning in a clockwise or anti-clockwise manner. The spinning air around your arm then becomes a funnel barrier. This barrier of moving air can deflect any attack your opponents throw at you; you'd literally become immune to weapons such as kunais and shurikens because they can't penetrate the swirling air barrier (unless they're chakra enhanced, of course)."

Ruri started demonstrating by releasing an exact amount of Chakra from her arm's opening points. The blue aura of her Chakra then started twisting around her arm, collecting the air particles as it continued to revolve, condensing said air particles and pulling it along with the rotation. Naruto could clearly see the thick swirling of pressurised air around his Aunt's arm and yet, it was so perfectly controlled and aligned that the air didn't hurt the arm at all. This technique was truly a double-edged sword, Naruto realised, because if he weren't good enough at chakra control then there was a real chance he could cut off his own arm by accident.

"With precise Chakra manipulation, you can learn how to control the size of the barrier - as in, how large the circumference of the spinning air funnel is. Or you can control the length of the funnel itself, making it as short or as long as you want. Or even the shape of the barrier - as in, you can extend it and make it into some kind of invisible drill or spear. (11) Combined with Taijutsu, the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) technique becomes a highly valued addition."

Finished with her explanations, Ruri then aimed her still chakra swirling arm (palm horizontal) at a large rock located some 10 metres away. Naruto followed her gaze and wondered what she's going to do to a rock so far away. What happened surprised him to the point of speechlessness.

He could feel his Aunt starting to exert more chakra into the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) technique and the amount of air collected into the condensed mass increased and lengthened the funnel until the whole length of the visible wind shield was a full 3 metres longer than her actual arm. Slowly but surely, Ruri continued to focus her chakra into the extending air funnel and soon enough, the invisible tip of the air drill was fully piercing the surface of the rock, without Ruri even taking a single step towards it. Giving a small smile in triumph, Ruri suddenly lifted her arm and made a slashing movement across the rock just before she released her chakra technique. All the previously condensed air particles immediately dispersed in their own directions, having all the pressure released. It was then that the rock finally moved, half of it sliding down one side before completely falling on the solid ground underneath, displaying the clear precision of Ruri's slice through the hard granite in the first place.

Naruto was in silent awe, his mouth hung open and his eyes wide. He couldn't believe how powerful this attack was. It was both a close-range and distance-range attack all in one, depending on how much Chakra the user has and how well the user can control them. It had capabilities for both offensive and defensive abilities. It was simply multi-functional and almost perfect in its usability, just like many of the other Air techniques he had learnt during his stay with his Aunt. It was definitely on par with the Rasengan (or at least the 3rd level of the Rasengan where he was up to anyway).

Ruri coughed for some attention and Naruto slowly abide by turning his eyes towards her, still very stunned by the beauty and power of her demonstration and only just realising the huge boost in battles he would have against his opponents once he had mastered this

technique. "So that ends the theory, history and practical demonstrations on the techniques, any questions?" She intoned with a very proud note in her voice, the way a teacher would take to her student.

Naruto could only blink for several seconds before collecting all of his scattered wit together. "Um... yeah... how long would it take to master those techniques? Both the Yochigan and the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) seems like high level techniques... So do you really think I'd be able to master it in just one measly week?" Naruto asked in a quiet voice, unable to keep the hope in his tone hidden.

The Lady Oracle's smile faded and she simply shook her head. "It takes almost a full year of intensive practicing to completely master these two techniques and that's the minimum time period. However, in the small week that we still have, we will do our best to reach the level in which you can at least use them in a real battle, but it would definitely be sloppy work the first few times. That means that you should be able to, as a minimum, consciously activate the Yochigan and hope that it shows you what you want to see; as well as being able to manipulate the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) without cutting your own arm off. If you can reach that level of advancement in just one week, then you're already well on your way. With extensive practice, you should be able to master enough of it within the next 3 months or so, to make it a safely usable addition to your long list of available techniques."

Naruto nodded to himself. There was probably no way he could master these two techniques in just one week anyway, but at least, he would try his very best. And it was exactly what he did for the remainder of the week. He stayed within the confines of the Jounin Training area, constantly practicing the two techniques consecutively with silent encouragement coming from his Aunt some of the times. But other than giving him some tips here and there, he had to figure everything out himself. After all, she couldn't very well tell him how he should manipulate his chakra; he had to learn it by trial and error.

Time flies when one is busy with important things. Soon, too soon in Naruto's opinion, the day of the competition finally arrived, the Chuunin Exam would begin tomorrow and Naruto (for the first time in almost a month) went to sleep early, trying to conserve as much energy as he could for the upcoming battles ahead.

(1) Yochigan (Prediction's eye) - "Yu Zhi Yen" (in Chinese) is translated to "Prediction's Eye", meaning that the eyes can see the future. Inspired by the power of the character Sven Vollfied in Black Cat (who has the same technique with the same name) mixed in with the Zero system from Gundam Wing .

(2) Original idea by a good friend of mine, Insanity. I actually wanted to call it 'Angel's PALM' because it is a 'Taijutsu' Technique, however, 'Angel's wraith' sounds so much better. oO;;;

(3) The following information is completely MADE-UP!!! OO;; Don't look for this in the original manga/anime series, because it doesn't exist. I'm a big Fantasy addict so I'm incorporating parts of it in Naruto.

(4) Example, even though Orochimaru was the original creator of the curse seals, but Ruri should be able to find a weakness in the seal and somehow break it.

(5) Yes, this is one of the Tenkun no bukis, but it won't be in use for a while yet, so stay tune.

(6) I said before (chapter 4) that the Tenkun no Bukis *"crave blood. These weapons are alive and they think, they desire and they will use all forms of seduction to get what they want!"* The 'Kakyu' is the only exception. Why? You'll find out later.

(7) Makai means 'Monster Realm'. Ningenkai means 'Human Realm'. Reikai means 'Spirit Realm'. All these names were taken from Yuu Yuu Hakusho .

(8) To officially become the next Uzumaki heir (Prophet house), the 'disciple' has to sign some kind of ancient contract (sort of like the Summoning contracts). If Naruto chooses to be a Breed, then all he has to do is to produce an heir for Ruri. It's very complicated, I know, but this is how it works.

(9) Inspired by the anime series Gate Keepers . If you've seen the animation, then you'll know what I'm talking about.

(10) I guess you could say it was inspired by the story Naruto - Way of the Ninja . --;; But it is different though, while in that story, Naruto expels chakra directly from his feet, here, he uses the charka to control the movement of Air underneath his feet. Slight difference I know, but it's basically why it's an 'Air' technique. AA

(11) Try to imagine something like Kimimaro's Ultimate spear at the end of chapter 216 of the Naruto manga. In this case, the spear/drill is made up of condensed air particles instead. Sorry for the spoiler for those who don't read the manga!

My GOD!! This chapter has certainly been loaded with a tonne of information. Hope none of you have gone insane from information overload yet. --;;

At last, the third and final Chuunin Exam is next!! Now, give me a few days to recover from these three chapters before I even THINK about how the Naruto Vs Neji fight is going to go... TT I'm tired already... If I ever try to do another 3 chappie update, it would be too soon...

Well, thank you for all your reviews and support. Please continue to push me. Read and Review.

If anyone is interested, I've got a gallery of sketches on the original characters and the Tenkun no buki uploaded onto my website. The address is: www.angelfire.com/anim3/karrafear/karrafearfanfiction/faithgallery.htm (without any of the spaces of course). Remember, it's 'HTM' not 'HTML'!!

Original Jutsus

NOT ALL jutsus used in the Faith's Arc are listed here, only some of them. However, all of my original ones are here. Jutsus go in alphabetical Order!!

The Chakra usage comparison comes in 5 different categories:

Nil = no need for Chakra at all, it's completely Taijutsu

Minimum = Academy type Ninjutsu or Genjutsu

Medium = Higher level jutsus

Maximum = Very high level jutsus

Extreme = only those with LOTS of chakra stamina can do.

Aisu shin no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Ice needles no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Naruto, Haku

Effects: A slight copy of Haku's 'flying water needles' but instead of using water, Naruto uses his Chakra to collect all the water vapour in the air, gather them and then freeze and harden them into ice needles and throw them at the enemy directed by more Chakra. It's a slow process but effective in surprising the enemy because they are not very visible. Size of needles can be manipulated.

Chakra Usage: Maximum.

Chidori

Translation: Thousand birds (or some people call it the "Lightning Edge")

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kakashi

Effects: Concentrated Chakra within the hands of the user that can strike through flesh and stone alike in high speed. Normally used for assassinations.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Doton: Chika Hodo no Jutsu (original) - NEW

Translation: Earth type: Underground Pathway no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kiba

Effects: lets the user travel underground

Chakra Usage: Minimum

Doton: Doryuu no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Earth type: Earth Dragon no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Orochimaru so far

Effects: creates a giant mud-Dragon from the surrounding earth

Chakra Usage : Maximum

Doton: Dosou no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Earth type: Earth Claw no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kakashi, Sasuke

Effects: Placing one or two hands onto the ground to direct Chakra, enables the earth directly underneath the opponent to swallow their feet into the ground.

Chakra Usage: Medium

Fuuin Kai: Kyuubi Bubun - Kibi Kitsu (original) - NEW

Translation: Seal Release: Partial Nine tail - Kibi Fox

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Naruto and Ruri (OC)

Effects: Releasing part of the seal that holds the Kyuubi's power from reaching Kibi, enables the little fox to gather some of Kyuubi's original powers - namely the power of the 5 elements. Kibi is transformed into a slightly larger size, and growing 5 tails instead of just one, each of these tails enable Kibi to use 1 of the 5 natural elements: fire, lightning, wind, water and sound.

Special Attacks with Kibi:

1) Kaze Dan (Wind bullets) - it's basically a ball of air being flung at one direction only. Though it is the size of a basketball, it is a very weak wind attack, used only to bruise their opponent and cause them immense pain for a short time without any permanent injuries.

2) Hosuiho (Water Cannon) - Blasting a lot of water directly from the mouth of the creature, intending to flood the opponents away.

3) Da Rai (Lightning Strike) - Releasing electrified spikes from the mouth of a creature and directing it at the opponent.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Fuuin Kai: Kyuubi Bubun - Kirin Kitsu (original) - NEW

Translation: Seal Release: Partial Nine tail - Kirin Fox

Type: Taijutsu

People: Naruto

Effects: Releasing part of the seal that holds the Kyuubi's power from reaching Kirin, enables the little fox to gather some of Kyuubi's original powers - namely the special power of 2 of the super-natural elements. Kirin is transformed into a very large fox, and grows 2 tails instead of just one, each of these tails enable Kirin to use 1 of 2 special elements in nature: magnetism and gravity. This enables Kirin to fly and control the natural balance of matter in a certain radius. Kirin is also Naruto's favourite riding partner.

Special Attacks with Kirin:

1) Gekitai Jiki! (Repel magnetism) - Repulsion against any metal objects just like magnets.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Gen Bunshin no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Illusionary clone no Jutsu

Type: Genjutsu

People: Kaga, Sakura (Naruto may have taught her this but he isn't very good at using it)

Effects: Very similar to the bunshin no Jutsu, except the fact that they are illusions. Bunshin (illusionary clones) are used to distract the enemy until an opening is shown, then the real person (whom is under an invisibility genjutsu cloak) is able to take advantage of that

opening and make it look as if it was the Bunshin who did the damage. Once the opponent believes that they are no longer dealing with just an illusion but actual bodies, they will attack the illusion and won't be able to hurt it at all, and the same process continues.

Chakra usage: Minimum but requires extreme Chakra control.

Gokakyuu no Jutsu

Translation: Fireball no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke, a lot of other people

Effects: Converts chakra into combustible air and flames, then blow it out of the creator's mouth, the heated air then reacts to outside air and creates a large fire ball that continues to burn until the original amount of chakra induced particles are completely burnt off. Can be directed at opponent using Chakra.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Hakke Juni Tenketsus Yonshyou (original)

Translation: Divinity Twelve Chakra Points Paw

Type: Taijutsu with chakra manipulation

People: Ruri (OC), Naruto

Effects: It is a slight deviation from the original Hyuga style Jyuuken. Unlike the Hakke Rokujyuu Yonshyou (Divinity 8s 64 Paw), this move only requires the user to strike 12 specific tenketsus and force large amounts of chakra into the opening points to completely damage them. These tenketsus all surround the heart of the opponent so the attack can only be used on either the back or front of the opponent's body. The chakra induced damage to these opening points are severe and permanent, so the opponent will no

longer be able to summon their own chakra unless they wish to undergo a lot of pain and even then, it would still be useless. The only person that can heal such an internal wound is probably Tsunade, the legendary medic nin. (P.S. Naruto can't see the opening points but he has been forced to memories where exactly they are on any person)

Chakra Usage: Medium

Harem no Jutsu

Type: Taijutsu

People: Ruri (OC), Naruto

Effects: a step up from 'sexy no jutsu', Naruto creates several Kage bunshins and convert them all with 'sexy no jutsu' so it will maximise the power of appeal towards his opponent.

Chakra Usage: Medium

Henge no Jutsu

Translation: Transformation

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Every one

Effects: used to transform their own appearances, into either human, animal or object.

Chakra usage: minimal

Invisibility Genjutsu (original)

Type: Genjutsu

People: Kaga (OC), Naruto, Sakura

Effects: This Genjutsu creates a concentrated field of Chakra around the user and one other (cannot be used for more than 2 people due to its concentration). This means that all of their scent, sound (ie. Breathing and heartbeat), smell and movement are absorbed by the Chakra shield coating their body. So, to an outsider, it will seem as if nothing exists there. The user can move out of the way if necessary. The only disadvantage is that this Genjutsu cannot last (one hour maximum).

Chakra Usage: Medium

Kage Bunshin no Jutsu

Translation: Shadow Clone no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Naruto mainly, other characters too

Effect: Creating multiple clones that are real life entities, that can take and make attacks. However, they all disappear after one severe hit.

Chakra usage: Maximum.

Kage Heki no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Shadow Barrier no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kaga

Effect: It is a barrier type ninjutsu as well as a teleportation type ninjutsu. It creates a rectangular prism barrier all around the intended person (either the user himself or someone he wants to protect) and the darkness within the prism continue to build up until only total darkness remains. After that, the people within are

teleported into a different location, and then the prism itself slowly dissipates.

Chakra usage: Medium but requires precise chakra control

Kakuryuu hon no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Black Dragon Flame

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kaga, Naruto

Effect: This jutsu is a mix between summoning and as a creation process. Holding his palm out, Naruto is able to convert his chakra into a special black flame that spirals around itself forming a spirit egg. Inside the egg, a spirit is summoned from the spirit realm, or those elemental sprites of nature. The spirit is then merged with the power of the black flame and together; it creates a new creature, a black dragon creature.

Chakra usage: Maximum

Katon: Housenka

Translation: Mythical Fire Flower

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Sasuke

Effect: blows out multiple small fireballs at opponents, can have hidden shurikens underneath the flames.

Chakra usage: Medium

Katon: Karyuu Endan

Translation: Fire Dragon Napalm

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Hokage, Kakashi

Effects: Blowing out a large surge of fire from the user's mouth that continues to burn brightly as long as the user still have chakra left.

Chakra usage: Maximum

Kawarimi no Jutsu

Translation: Body Substitution

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Everyone

Effects: Substitute your original body with something else, can be an inanimate object like a block of wood, or can be liquefied into mud, or other processes.

Chakra Usage: Minimal

Ki Bunshin no Jutsu (original)

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Ruri (OC), Kaga (OC), Naruto, everyone from the Hidden Air village

Effects: Similar to the Bunshin no Jutsu, the Ki bunshin is NOT a physical being, therefore it is not physical, you can't touch it at all. The Chakra moulds itself into a copy of the user in the psychic plane or spiritual plane, so it can move through all physical matter (desk, walls, people, you name it) since it doesn't hold physical matter. It has no offensive abilities but is very good in being a spy because not many people can tell it even exists (Byakugan users excluded). The spirit clone is able to gather information from enemy ground without the enemy noticing, and even if the enemy does notices, unless they

too can practice the Ki bunshin, then they are unable to stop the clone from continuing its spying work. VERY EFFECTIVE!

Chakra Usage: Minimal (since it doesn't fight, not much Chakra is needed)

Konoha Senpuu

Translation: Leaf Spinning Wind

Type: Taijutsu

People: Lee

Effects: With an element of strength, speed and surprise, Lee can knock away several opponents with one spinning kick. (Info from narutofan.net)

Chakra Usage: Nil (completely Taijutsu move)

Kuchiyose no jutsu: Tenkun no buki - Ginshi no Himo (original)

Translation: Summoning no Jutsu: Heavenly weapons - Silver Strings of Death

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Ruri (OC), Naruto

Effects: For every metal string that is activated by Naruto, the other end of the same metal tentacle is attached to Naruto's arm, following his veins and absorbing his chakra. It takes a lot of concentration to activate multiple strings to do his bidding and the longer he uses the Ginshi no himo, the harder it is to detach the metal strings from his arm's muscles, veins, arteries and closing onto his heart.

Chakra Usage: Extreme

Special Attacks:

1) Absolute Defence - having the strings randomly swirl around Naruto creates an absolute defence.

Kuchiyose no jutsu: Tenkun no buki - Kakuhouou no Hane (original)

Translation: Summoning no Jutsu: Heavenly weapons - Black Phoenix feather

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Ruri (OC), Naruto

Effects: The heart of the deceased phoenix is physically attached to Naruto's backside and the feather patters starts growing out of it. The feathers becomes real and finds their way out of Naruto's body by piercing through his skin. While growing, the wings, consume large amounts of blood, flesh and chakra, until it reaches its full form.

Chakra Usage: Extreme

Special Attacks:

1) Kaku Haneya (Black Feather Arrows) - feathers are thrown at enemies like projectiles

2) Hou Ou Fukatsu (Phoenix Rebirth) - release of large amounts of chakra into a huge burning ball of light that burns everything in the vicinity

3) Kaku Hon Kogeki (Black Flame Attack) - release large fireballs directed at enemy.

Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu (original)

Translation : Forced Sleep no Jutsu

Type: Genjutsu

People: Kakashi, Sakura

Effects: the user aims a concentrated Chakra bind directly into their opponent (as in they must physically touch their opponent - so it's different to the one Kabuto used) and renders them unconscious or asleep for however many hours the user wants.

Chakra usage: Minimal

Mukaku no Jutsu (original) - NEW

Translation: Blind Senses Technique or Void Senses Techniqu

Type: Genjutsu

People: Haku, Sakura

Effects: It's a Genjutsu technique that attacks the five senses of a human body and shuts them down for a very short period of time. Basically, it renders the person blind, deaf, numb to whatever their touch, unable to hear and without any taste buds at all for a maximum period of 15 minutes.

Chakra Usage: Medium

Oroi no Jutsu

Translation: Sexy no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Naruto

Effects: Transformation into a naked female version of Naruto (with pigtails). Irresistible to perverts.

Chakra Usage: Minimum

Rasengan

Translation: Spirit Bullet

Type: Ninjutsu

People: 4th Hokage, Jiraiya, Naruto

Effects: There are around 8 different levels to the Rasengan (though I'm not sure about all of them yet...)

- 1) To be able to get the Chakra to spin in every direction at any one time.
- 2) To concentrate as much Chakra as possible and still be able to spin it in every direction.
- 3) To charge the spinning Chakra to its maximum spin until it forms a perfect sphere
- 4) (From outside sources!) To create an ultimate defence by forming a large sphere that surrounds the user within a certain radius.
- 5) (From outside sources!) To transmit their own chakra into the opponent's body and creates the attack there.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

RaiKan Mahi no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Lightning shock paralysis

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Jiraiya, Naruto, Sasuke

Effects: Concentrating electrified Chakra on the palm of the hand, this Ninjutsu is very effective when used with appropriate Taijutsu.

Chakra usage: Medium usage

Raiten Misu Bakuhatsu no Jutsu (original)

Translation: Lightning Water Blast no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Kaga (OC), Naruto, Haku

Effects: It is an explosion blast that directs the resulting electrified water towards the opponent to smash against them.

Chakra usage: Maximum

Senei Jyashu

Translation: Sublime snake hands

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Orochimaru, Anko

Effects: Orochimaru summons multiple snakes from different parts of his body (tongue, arms, etc.) to attack the enemy and immobilise them.

Chakra usage: Minimal

Shuriken Kage bunshin no Jutsu

Translation: Throwing star shadow clone no Jutsu

Type: Ninjustu

People: Naruto and others

Effects: Applying the same concept of Shadow replications for humans to shurikens. Each replica of shuriken are real entities.

Chakra Usage: Medium

Suiton Daibakufu no Jutsu

Translation: Water Explosion no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Haku, Naruto, Kakashi, Mist Nins, other higher Shinobis

Effects: Another complicated water technique that requires large amounts of chakra and plenty of hand seals to perform. It creates a large surge of water that spirals towards the user's enemy and then explode with the opponent still inside.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Suiton Suijen Heki no Jutsu

Translation: Water Element: Water Barrier no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Haku, Naruto, Kakashi, Mist Nins, other higher Shinobis

Effects: Creates a water barrier wall that protects the user and anyone else he wishes to protect. Depending on the amount of Chakra used, the walls of water can be quite large.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Suiton: Suiryuudan no Jutsu

Translation: Water Dragon Blast no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: Haku, Naruto, Kakashi, Mist Nins, other higher Shinobis

Effects: A very advanced ninjutsu that uses many seals and needs a lot of Chakra to form a full dragon to attack (Zabuza, Naruto). Some

called forth this dragon using available water resources from the surrounding area; others get their water supply by condensing water molecules from the air (Haku); some are able to convert their Chakra into water and then use that as part of their intended attack (MisuKage).

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Taiyuu Kage Bunshin no Jutsu

Translation: Multiple Shadow Clones no Jutsu

Type: Ninjutsu

People: mainly Naruto and others

Effects: An advance clone that can take attacks as well as make attacks. They are real individual entities with a shared mind for strategy and their existence is completely controlled by their creator.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Tenshi no Doki - NEW (original)

Translation: Angel's Wraith

Type: Chakra manipulation technique usually coupled with Taijutsu

People: Air Nins

Effects: It requires charka to swirl continuously around a certain body part in order to strengthen said body part during a Taijutsu battle. The most common place to activate the Tenkun no Doki would be either on the palms of the hand or underneath your feet.

Feet - By forming the Tenshi no Doki directly underneath your feet and manipulating your chakra in such a way that you force the air itself to condense and spin under your body weight, you're actually able to make yourself hover for a few seconds off the ground. The

height, distance and speed of your jumps can also be increased by about 200 percent if used with the Tenshi no Doki.

Palm - Basically, you expel chakra from the opening points located on your arm, and then consciously controlling this released chakra to manipulate the air particles surrounding your palm and arms into swirling directly around said appendage, either spinning in a clockwise or anti-clockwise manner. The spinning air around your arm then becomes a funnel barrier. With precise Chakra manipulation, you can learn how to control the size of the barrier - as in, how large the circumference of the spinning air funnel is; or you can control the length of the funnel itself, making it as short or as long as you want; or even the shape of the barrier - as in, you can extend it and make it into some kind of invisible drill/spear.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Yochigan - NEW (original)

Translation: Prediction's eye

Type: Bloodline Limit technique

People: Naruto and Ruri Uzumaki

Effects: By pushing a lot of chakra into the eyes of a Uzumaki, one can activate the bloodline limit ability of Yochigan. It can see several seconds, minutes or even days ahead of an event, and so too, it can also see up to years into the past. It is up to the user to pinpoint exactly what they want to see and how. When activated, it creates a second image within your eyes that is juxtaposed next to the image of what is happening directly in front of you, so it is up to the user to distinguish between the two images. When reacting to an image of the future, the physical body automatically speeds up in correspondence to what was seen by the eyes. It doesn't just show you one future. It shows you multiple futures, as in it will show you all the possibilities of the future.

Side Effects:

- 1) The eyes will become blind temporarily and it will bleed directly after usage.
- 2) It may cause headaches because it places a lot of stress on the user's mind to interpret between the multiple images that both eyes are seeing at the same time. The user may suffer an information overload and in the long term, turn completely insane or go brain dead.
- 3) It also places a lot of stress on the user's body due to its increased speed of reaction time to the images shown so the user will feel severely tired straight after.

Chakra Usage: Maximum

Chapter 15

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Fifteen: Chuunin Exam Pt1

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

Hinanaru, TokehGecko (I still can't believe you actually like my fic), BigAzxDaddy, Sonydisnmix, Night-Owl123, Siera-Falls, Swtiemz, hmr, Toki Mirage, narusukawooo, CHOUJI, anonymous, weagre, Gopu, DespairingAngel, insanechildfanfic, inu-chan613, clicke, Masiyuu, AngelOfPastPresentAndFuture, poodoo: ARIGATO MINNA!!! Thank you all soooo much for continuing to support me. It's always refreshing to read all these reviews and stimulating to reply to them. As for anyone wishing to know my website address or email address, it's below next to the warning sign.

Hitomi no Ryu: Sorry about the repetition of the English name after 'Yochigan'. What happened was I used 'replace' on the Edit menu to change all of them when I completed the chapter because I was lazy... ww;; Guess I won't be doing that again... Naruto will be wearing a traditional battle gown for combat in this chapter, but because he is an 'Uzumaki' almost everything he wears is white. Please understand that the Air Nins are not your typical Ninjas, they don't have a Ninja academy (any more anyway) and they don't have Ninja uniforms, what they normally wear are their clan's traditional clothes. That's all. If you're still interested on seeing what they actually wear, on my website, at the bottom of the fanfic gallery, you will find 10 Air Nin characters that are my original characters (whom

will appear in the 2nd arc), and analyse their clothing. Thanks for telling me that 'Hidden Air Village' means 'Kuunokigakure' (Hidden air Village) - I was getting tired of always calling it that!

Warriorphantom: Thanks for your support. About the tension between Ruri and the main Hyuuga family (note - she has nothing against the Branch family, just the main family), it's actually not a conflict involving the Uzumaki. The disputes actually occurred between the Dokudes clan (a very powerful clan in the Hidden Air village) and how the Hyuuga main family treated one of their members previously. Ever since that incident, the Dokudes clan had never forgiven the Hyuuga's for their actions and there have been a tension between the Air and Leaf villages from that time onward. That's all I can tell you if I don't want to spoil anything.

Erikkoekkoek: Actually, I did watch a few episodes of Saikano a long time ago, but I didn't really like it that much. It was just too sad for me and I don't really like those war films. I didn't mind the mechas but I just couldn't stand how every single character suffers and there's no end in sight. What can I say; I'm a bit of a romantic. Oo;; Anyway, if you really wanted to use some of my techniques, I don't mind if you copy them. Hell, just look at the list of stuff I've copied from other people... I'd be a hypocrite if I stopped others from doing the same to me. It'd actually be an honour that you'd think so highly of my techniques to use them in your own story.

SaLLy11: Actually, it's a 3-chapter update starting with Chapter 12, in case you still haven't noticed. And yeah, Kaga is teaching Shikamaru! nn You'll just have to see what happens next for yourself.

Reader: The Hidden Air village is as it was described to be. The people who live there are very powerful, but they also have the least numbers of Shinobi, so it balances out. Ruri has her reasons for being rude and slightly arrogant. It's all a mask anyway. She was born into her position (taken away from her family at age 2) and was forced to take the reign of power at the mere age of 14. She has a lot of anger and frustration trapped inside and she usually uses her nonchalant attitude as a mask that hides all that pain. She's harsh,

blunt and painfully to the point; she dislikes mincing words so she goes straight into telling the Hokage off for not killing Orochimaru in the first place. In front of the public, she would act like a welcomed guest, but in private, this is the way she is. As for the Air village having diplomats, I never mentioned anything about Ruri being one of these diplomats. In fact, this is the first time Ruri had ever left the village, all the other 'diplomats' are high ranking Shinobi that aren't as stuck up in behaviour as her. Naruto is OOC because this story is AU. His moods changes constantly depending on the situation - if he is free, without responsibilities, then he would be a cheery kind of guy; when in the presence of his Aunt, he becomes solum, quiet, and very obedient. As for the exercises, I do believe they are hard. Standing up side down for so long forces all the blood to rush into his head, making it even more difficult to control his Chakra. Not to mention, in the original manga, Naruto took quiet a long time just to learn the Rasengan. The large Chakra amount being forced continuously onto the palms of your hand or in this case, out of your hand but still connected to you is very difficult to do. Other than the Chidori and the Rasengan, I don't know of any other hand-based techniques (Hyuuga Jyuken not counted of course). All the other Ninjutsu uses the hand seals to command how the Chakra will be manipulated inside the body, but the Chakra output may not be the hands at all; a lot of those big Jutsus come from the mouth! No one actually uses their hands for Ninjutsu ability for a long period of time in the entire Naruto series (I don't think), most of them didn't even last an hour.

Insanity: Thank you for your compliments. The history of the Uzumaki clan and the Hidden Air village is very important to this story so I had to get it stabilised early on. The 'Prophet' house doesn't really keep the truth from the 'Breed', its just that each of the 'Prophet' members was literary born into the responsibilities (just like the Hyuuga Branch house was born into servitude). The 'Breed', as their names suggest, were originally viewed as simply the 'breeding/procreation' stock in which they produce the next prophet. Okay, I admit, 'eons' seems a bit too long, but I was tired of simply saying 'thousands of years' again and again, even 'millennia' seems

to become repetitive now. nn;; I see you as a good friend because only friends help each other continuously without needing anything in return, I may not know you personally, but knowing that you're also an avid Naruto fan and willing to help me is enough for me. nn Yeah, it was a bit cruel to put Sakura with Ebisu, but it didn't last! See, I do have a heart! Closet perverts don't admit outwardly that they are perverts and so, Ebisu hides behind his 'Gentlemanly' deeds. For now, I will mostly be touching on Naruto, Sakura, Shikamaru, Gaara and my OCs; I didn't want to touch on Sasuke yet because he's a difficult character for me to relate to (mainly because I really don't like him) but I will be fair in his characterisation when I finally have something to say about him. Once again, thank you soo much for all the Jutsu ideas and stuff, I really like the seals you made up too, definitely find a place to put them into.

Dfourthhorseman: Thanks for the great compliment. (Blush) But I won't be having the Kyuubi teach Naruto any techniques because in this fic, demons can't use such Chakra techniques; they just have raw power (um... Shukaku being the only exception here Oo;;) Both Kibi and Kirin seems a lot weaker at first mainly because Naruto doesn't know how to use them to their fullest potential, later, during the fight against Gaara, they'd be a lot more powerful! Naruto had become a lot more cheerful since the earlier chapters but since his aunt's arrival, he'll slowly fall into a slight depression again. As for his clothes, he won't be wearing the bright orange, but while in traditional Air Nin uniform, he will be wearing white instead. The Uzumaki clan may be very old but they're not one of the animal 'speakers', but don't worry, I've already got planned another powerful clan that do speak to animals and stuff like that coming up. I'm still not sure whether Naruto would look like his father or not when he grows up, so we'll both see what comes up when it does. Oo;; Shukaku isn't a true demon in this story, because I read somewhere (in the manga) that Shukaku was originally a 'Sand Priest' that later became a demon. And in this story, all true demons are animal-like to begin with, so Shukaku is a demon - but a 'human-evolved' demon, so he can be considered as a high 'A', since Gamabunta did defeat it with Naruto's help.

Calabolg: Thanks for the info about how to pronounce 'Hyuuga'. I think I'll stick with the official 'uu' version. However, if I did spell it with just one 'u', then.. I guess you guys will just have to bear with me.

MichaelBirote: Hi! Thank you for reviewing. As for your questions, Naruto won't be using the Yochigan against Neji; he won't need to. And Sakura will most definitely be fighting Dosu. So keep reading and find out what happens.

...: I fixed the 'Harem no Jutsu' but I don't see what was wrong with the 'Kage Bunshin no Jutsu'..

OpposingForce: Wow! I would have never thought that my story was that inspiring. Thank you sooo much for your review and support. It's good to know that I have such avid fans out there. nn There will be romance in this story (NaruHina) but it won't be coming up anytime soon (mainly because they still aren't very close yet), so I'll have to develop the relationship slowly. Maybe in the second arc or after, then I'll really start pushing for relationships because they all (by then) 14 or 15 years old, which seems like a better age to start trying out relationships then 12. ;;

Zen: Arigato for your review. I'm sorry about the inconveniences. My email should be stated below these replies (around the warning section). And I give you permission to put my fic into which ever contest you want. K? Once again, thank you!

Jace: Thanks for the info about the drinking age thing. I was always very confused about that. Hey, in that case, how come Naruto was complaining to Gamabunta (in the manga) saying that he wasn't 20 yet, so he couldn't drink sake? Just wondering.

Dragon Noir: Um.. I'm not exactly sure what you're asking of me but I'll try to explain the sequence between those characters you've stated anyway. During the first examination, Dosu did crack Kabuto's glasses without actually touching him, but at the time most of the Genins were stressed out and nervous so they didn't really have time to think much about it. During the 2nd exam however, after

remembering Dosu's attack, Sakura reviewed what she had seen him do and came to the conclusion that he uses sound as an attack. As for Lee, he isn't the type that would remember something so insignificant unless he was told to do so by Gai. I hope that clears up all the confusion.

I'm back!!! After taking a short 1 week holiday, and a chapter for my other fics, I'm back into writing out the next chapters of Faith.

For everyone still wondering, the gallery for this story is this:

'w w w (dot) angelfire (dot) com (forward slash) anime3 (forward slash) karrafear (forward slash) karrafear (underscore) fanfiction (forward slash) faith (underscore) gallery (dot) htm' [without any of the spaces and follow the bracketed symbols]

I'm sorry for the long name but that's what happens when I don't have my own domain name. When I do change the site though, I swear you guys will be the first to know.

As for my email, it is this:

'shella (the AT symbol) iinet (dot) net (dot) au' [without any of the spaces and follow the bracketed symbols]

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13.

= = means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

[...] Flashback scenes

Chapter 15

Upon the centre of the arena belonging to the stadium used as the official stage for the final Chuunin exam, there stood 8 Genins and 1 Jounin examiner. In a row, the participants arranged themselves into a line, with Dosu Kinuta, Kankuro, Temari, Gaara on one side of the examiner, and on the other side stood Hyuuga Neji, Aburame Shino, Haruno Sakura and Nara Shikamaru.

Sakura turned her head from side to side, trying to see who was at each end of the line of Genins with a look of concern on her face. =Neither Naruto or Sasuke is here yet. Sasuke, being with Kakashi-sensei, I can understand him being late... But Naruto? He's never been late for any important meetings before so where could he be?= Shifting nervously, Sakura looked up at their new examiner, Genma, and asked timidly: "Um.. excuse me... we have two missing participants at the moment... what would happen to them if they don't make it on time?"

"Heh... that Uzumaki is probably running away from this fight because he knows that there can only be one outcome to our battle." Neji replied snidely.

Suppressing her anger, Sakura narrowed her eyes at the white-eyed boy. "What's that suppose to mean?"

"Geniuses will always be geniuses. I will definitely win." Neji responded succinctly.

Sakura narrowed her eyes even more in anger. "I don't think so. You have no idea how powerful Naruto is..."

"Enough! The both of you!" rebutted Genma, irritated at having to referee these pathetic kids. "Act your proper age and station in front of all the customers!" Both Genin immediately quietened down at being scolded. After a few seconds more of silence, Genma turned towards Sakura to finally answer her previous question. "If they don't make it in time then they will automatically be disqualified unless specified by the Hokage himself." With the question answered, he turned back to gaze forward at the large cheering crowd.

High above the stadium, there is a VIP platform, in which the Hokage of Konoha was currently located, sitting peacefully, awaiting his two guests. Upon hearing an unfamiliar noise, the third Hokage looked up to see that one of his guests had finally arrived. Rising from his chair, the Hokage greeted his guest with a bow of respect. "Welcome to Konoha, Kazekage-dono. It's a pleasure to see you again."

Pleasantries were exchanged between the two Kages as they continued to chat about non-essential things, until the third and final guest made an appearance to both. "Well. Well. I'm glad to see you've decided to join us for this important event, my Lady," announced the Hokage cheerily, while the Kazekage turned around to look suspiciously at the three strangers walking towards them. (A female in white, a tall male in black, and another short figure in a white cloak) The Hokage had not been certain whether or not the Lady would make an appearance at the function at all, but had a hunch she would since Naruto was participating and so had arranged for the extra seat.

"Let me introduce you both. Kazekage-dono, meet Lady Uzumaki Ruri, also known as the Lady Oracle of the Hidden Air village. And if you may not have already known, Lady, this is the Kazekage of the Hidden Sand village." The third Hokage politely introduced each of his two very important guests before moving on to their more renowned subordinates. "Behind the lady are her faithful servant, Kaga-san, a true Shadow Master; as well as her nephew and heir apparent, Uzumaki Naruto."

At this point, Naruto had pulled back the hood of his oversized white cloak and revealed himself to the two important figureheads. On his forehead displayed proudly the head protector of the Hidden Air village (a dot surrounded by 2 circles), not the Leaf. Though Kazekage's face remained placid, his eyes did widen slightly at the implication of Naruto being part of 'that' family line. However, unable to voice his inner thoughts, the Kazekage decided to play along with the cheery greeting. "It is a great honour to be able to meet the

legendary ruler of the Hidden Air village face to face. Please accept my humble praise of you and your clan's powers." He bowed in respect to one of the oldest and most powerful clans in the world.

"The pleasure is all mine... Kazekage-dono." The Lady Oracle's stern gaze pierced through the Kazekage's very soul as she countered succinctly to his praise.

Feeling the tension in the air, the Hokage decided to interfere by officially starting the Chuunin Exam. "Well. Since everyone's here already, let's get this show on the road, shall we?" He inquired innocently.

Turning her gaze away from the Kazekage, Ruri looked towards Naruto and nodded her head slightly. Naruto bowed low to his waist before turning around and walking towards the edge of the balcony.

Seeing the confusion in the Kazekage's eyes, the Hokage decided to explain the odd behaviour of the Uzumaki heir apparent. "Naruto is a participant of the Chuunin Selection Exam which is why he must make his way down to the arena. He only stood here because he is the Uzumaki heir and it is required of him to make an appearance at the very least."

Upon reaching the handrail, Naruto simply jumped over the obstacle and immediately started plummeting onto the ground below, head first. His white cloak fluttered wildly in the breeze of the air rushing by, just as his hair defied gravity by standing almost straight up. An instant before his impact landing however, Naruto released small amounts of chakra from all of his opening points, and started using that chakra to collect, condense and swirl the very air around his body. =Tenshi no Doki!= He thought to himself as he performed the move as well as flipping himself mid air so that he lands on his feet instead of his head.

Upon impact, a giant boom resonated through out the arena, silencing the crowd. Soon after, Naruto was revealed, standing impassively in the centre of a small crater, visibly showing no signs

of injury as his body's landing had been cushioned by the very air itself, similar to the way Gaara's sand would have cushion himself if he were ever to fall. Walking towards his fellow Genin, Naruto stood next to Shikamaru and ignored all the curious gazes of his fellow participants at his changed clothes and forehead protector.

Amazed at Naruto's show of power, though he didn't show it on his face, the Hokage decided that now would be a good time to finally commence the matches. With both of his guests firmly seated, the third Hokage walked towards the same handrail that Naruto had just jumped over, but stopped in his motions before he actually had to grasp the metal object. "Thank you all for coming to the Hidden Leaf Chuunin Selection Exam! We will now start the main tournament matches between the ten participants who made it through the preliminaries. Please stay in your seats and watch until the end." Announced the third Hokage in a loud and clear voice, heard by everyone in the stadium.

Finally given the signal to start, Genma turned around to face all the remaining Genins. "Well. The rules are the same as the preliminary matches. You fight until one of you dies, or one of you admits defeat or I say so. Now, will the rest of you please make your way to the above waiting area so that I can start the first match." Genma drawled, seemingly uninterested in the upcoming fights, though internally, he was already very curious about the extent of the Air Nin's ability. =Not many people had ever seen an actual Air Nin fight.. This battle will be very interesting..=

Once the rest of the participants had left the immediate area, the two opponents of the first match stared impassively at one another awaiting the examiner's commands. Neither spoke or made any gesture towards the other, but both had already waged a mental war against one another. Genma looked at both boys before speaking up: "The first match! Uzumaki Naruto Versus Hyuuga Neji! Begin!" He yelled.

Immediately following that announcement, Neji placed himself into a defensive Hyuuga Jyuken stance, waiting patiently for Naruto to attack. Naruto, on the other hand, quickly unclasped his white cloak and left it on the floor, revealing his strange outfit underneath. He had on traditional Air Nin attire - high collared, long sleeved, zipped shirt with intricate beads patterned all over, as well as a slightly baggy jumpsuit pants folded in at the bottom to reveal black combat boots instead of the normal Ninja sandals (the only article in which wasn't white in colour as dictated by Uzumaki customs).

Naruto then started performing his favourite seals. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu! (Shadow Clone Technique)!" Naruto yelled as 10 of his own clones appeared out of nowhere surrounding him. Five of the ten clones launched themselves at Neji in a close hand combat situation, while the other five and the original Naruto stayed where they were, waiting, watching and analysing their opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

Using his Byakugan, Neji was able to avoid all of the kicks and punches aimed at him from the various clones. Though fast, the clones were still holding back a lot of their true speeds; they were only testing out the extent of Neji's ability after all, and they saw no reason in revealing their own trump cards so early in the fight.

Jumping up, away from all the clones' barrages, Neji did a somersault in mid air, over all the blonde heads, and landed several feet away from the two groups of Naruto. "Even though the Byakugan cannot tell the difference between a clone and the real entity because your chakra has been divided evenly among them, but I can tell you this now... Victory will be mine; you're only prolonging the inevitable." Neji drawled in an arrogant and cold voice.

"Whatever!" yelled most of the Naruto, and this time, seven of the clones launched themselves at Neji, while another three prepared themselves by performing seals, leaving one Naruto standing by the side and watching all of them.

Noticing the change from defensive to offensive manoeuvres from the extra clones, Neji decided to stop playing around with them. Waiting for the first two clones to reach him, Neji ducked underneath both their punches, twisted his body as he crouched, and slammed both his palms into the chest of the clones. Both clones disappeared into puffs of smoke straight away. Swiping the next incoming clone off his feet with one sweep of his leg, Neji quickly disposed of it by crushing another palm into the forehead of the clone.

Rolling backwards onto his hands, Neji pushed himself up, off the ground and into the air, narrowly avoiding two kicks from two more Naruto clones. While still in the air, Neji rotated his body around in a spin. Pausing mid way through his spinning movements, Neji suddenly lashed out with both his legs outstretched, smashing into the chests of the two clones that had aimed kicks at him from before.

Landing lightly on both his hands and feet, Neji paused minutely in time, waiting for the two clones behind him to start attacking. Finally seeing the two clones moves using his Byakugan, Neji quickly reached back, grabbed onto their hands holding protruding kunais just before they struck his back. Pushing backwards rapidly, Neji bashed his bent elbows right into the Naruto clones' faces.

Releasing his grip on their wrists, twisting his feet and turning around, Neji crushed both his open palms onto the chests of the two clones, resulting in both disappearing into smoke. Now, seven of the once ten clones had been dealt with, which only left three more clones and the real Naruto.

"Raikan Mahi no Jutsu! (Lightning Shock Paralysis!)," yelled one of the four remaining Naruto as he finished his seals. This Naruto readied himself into a defensive, Taijutsu stance, placing his hands out in the open, in front of him.

"Katon: Gokakyuu no Jutsu (Flame type: Powerful fire ball technique)," yelled another of the four remaining Naruto as he completed his seal. This Naruto took a deep breath and quickly blew out a giant fireball aimed at Neji who stood only several metres away from the blast.

Throwing a Chakra-enhanced (control-enhanced) shuriken into the fireball just released, a third Naruto silently commanded it to collect the burning flames within the Gokakyuu no Jutsu, and then to continue spinning in the direction aimed at Neji. The move almost completely imitates the 'Katon Housenka' (Mythical Fire Flower Jutsu) technique used by the Uchiha. However, Naruto had another trick up his sleeve to add to the combination. Straight after he threw the shuriken, this Naruto quickly performed another set of seals. "Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu! (Shuriken Shadow Clone technique)!" This act resulted in the sudden appearance of hundreds of burning shurikens all at once, swirling through the air in constant motions.

Neji gazed silently at the incoming fireball as well as the hundreds of burning shurikens all heading his way. Knowing he couldn't hold back, lest he suffered an injury of two, Neji immediately launched himself into the Kaiten. "Hakkeshou: Kaiten (Hand of the Eight Divinations: Heavenly Spin)!" Neji called out as he started spinning his body while releasing chakra from all of his opening points at the same time.

The Kaiten performed by Neji effectively neutralised the giant fireball that had been aimed at him by one of the four Naruto remaining. (1) With the Gokakyuu no Jutsu rendered useless, it was easy picking for Neji to deflect the burning shurikens in the same manner. Upon contact with the Kaiten, many of the shuriken clones also puffed out of existence, due to the stress of combating the chakra force field in the first place. Even though they were chakra-enhanced shurikens, but these enhancement of control didn't let Naruto have any other effect except control over their movements and directions, not their life expectancy. Once all the shuriken clones were deflected out of existence, Neji easily caught the original shuriken, which had already ran out of flames and threw it towards the last of the four remaining Narutos, who had not yet entered the battle.

The last Naruto figure, who had stood impassively as he watched the other three Narutos attack Neji again and again, watched the

incoming shuriken with a glazed expression on his face. Just before the shuriken made contact and slice into his face however, Naruto quickly reached up and caught the single shuriken firmly between his two fingers and thumb, still eyeing Neji with a cautious stare.
=Hyuuga Neji... He's a difficult opponent... Especially when I can't use any of the Tenkun no buki anymore...= Naruto thought silently to himself as his eyes glazed again.

[FLASHBACK]

"Naruto. There will be one more thing we must do before you start your matches," informed the Lady Oracle as she stopped half way up the stairs to the VIP platform.

Naruto looked confused at his aunt, wondering why she would interrupt his concentration at this particular time, just before the exam itself, but he nodded in acquiescence none the less.

Seeing his acknowledgement, Ruri went straight to the point of the matter: "I forbid you to use the Tenkun no buki in any of your upcoming matches or any time after the Chuunin Exam without my explicit permission."

Naruto's eyes slowly widened at her order. "But..."

Before he was able to voice his thoughts, Ruri beat him to the punch. "You WILL follow my orders, word for word!" She emphasized with a heated glare at her nephew, whom shrunk back at the vehemence of her tone and could only nod back in admission.

Releasing her glare, the Lady Oracle continued to look sternly at Naruto. "This is for your own good. It is not to your benefit to rely on the Tenkun no buki so often. Remember your battle against Orochimaru? If you had not been taken away from the immediately vicinity, or if Orochimaru had returned any sooner, you would have been dead because you were defenceless. The Tenkun no buki requires their users to take a very long time to recover after just one use, and currently, you DON'T have any time to waste. I prohibit the

use of any Tenkun no buki without my permission or my immediate presence. You need to learn how to rely on your other sources of power, namely, the beast that resides in you. It's about time you learn how to draw out the Kyuubi's power to your fullest efficiency."

That said, Ruri then bit her thumb to draw out some blood, quickly performing a complicated seal, she grabbed onto both of Naruto's hands and pulled them from under the cloak. Drawing a strange and yet intricate design (2) on the back of each hand, the Lady Oracle continued to hum and whisper to herself a special charm that accompanies the intricate sealing system. Once the blood pattern was complete, Ruri finished up the rest of her hand seals and called out shortly after: "Ichi Hoshi Fuuin no Jutsu - Tenkun no Buki Fuuin! (One Star Sealing Jutsu - Weapons of Heavenly Warriors sealed!)"

Naruto blinked at the hot flash of sensations running from his palms all the way to his heart and stomach (the source of his Chakra). Soon after, the eccentric looking seal started disappearing from the back of his hands until they appeared completely normal, as if nothing had been done to them in the first place. The strange feeling that came with the sealing also died away leaving Naruto even more confused than ever.

"From now on until I release you from this seal, you will not be able to summon the Tenkun no buki again." Turning around, Ruri then started to walk back up the stairs, with Kaga trailing not far behind. Naruto, however, took a few minutes to digest all of the Lady Oracle's reasons for her decisions. In the end, he could only sigh in frustration and started running after her.

[END FLASHBACK]

Naruto blinked back to reality only to realise Neji had abruptly ran towards him in the short amount of time he had been day dreaming. Being in such close range already, Naruto had no time to evade and no way to block the attack effectively. Neji, taking his chance, punched brutally into Naruto's stomach, forcing the breath out of him. Naruto choked out some blood, dropped the shuriken that he

had been holding in his hand previously and glared at Neji with all his worth. In the background, two of the clones (the one who created the Gokakyuu no Jutsu, and the one who formed the Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu) disappeared into clouds of smoke.

"To be distracted while in battle... It's one of the most basic mistakes that any Ninja could do. As I have said before, victory was mine the very moment I've been chosen to be your opponent." Neji sneered cruelly as he stepped back from the crumpled form of Naruto.

Naruto continued to glare at Neji while he continued to choke out more blood. Taking a deep breath, he forced out three words through his clenched teeth: "Don't underestimate me..." And with that, he too, disappeared into a cloud of smoke.

=WHAT!! A BUNSHIN!!= Neji realised too late as he quickly reactivated his Byakugan (of which he had disabled when he believed he had taken out the real Naruto). Once the Byakugan was activated again, Neji saw that his opponent was directly behind him, already pressing a palm into his back.

Unable to dodge, Neji quickly tried to create a chakra barrier on his back (pushing chakra out of the Tenketsu - opening points - that are located on that part of his body) to prevent any major injury from happening. However, to his continual horror, Naruto's palm bypassed his chakra barrier (as it is made out of chakra as well) (3) and smashed brutally against his body. The momentum and the force of the strike flung Neji forward violently. Landing roughly on the hard ground and dragged some metres, Neji's body shuddered against the forced entry of an alien chakra into his own inner coil system, disrupting his own chakra control and electrifying some of his organs.

Blinking his eyes open after a short moment of dizziness, Neji gave Naruto his best glare with a hint of fear and confusion in them. =He anticipated that I would be suspicious of any outstanding clones and so, he purposely created a clone to stand out, luring me into a false belief that it was the real him. I don't know what kind of attack he

used on me but it's very similar to my own Jyuken style, only this own doesn't have to attack the Tenketsu (opening points) to be effective. In fact, as long as he can touch any part of my body, I would sustain damage. It's truly a deadly attack.= Neji analysed quickly as he remembered Naruto's previous move.

Luckily for Neji, Naruto didn't attack him then and there. He simply stood still, waiting for the effects of his technique's paralysis to wear off, waiting for Neji to stand up and fight again.

Finally, after a few moments of further embarrassed shuddering, Neji collected himself and stood up firmly. =I have to end the fight as soon as possible. He knows my body's weakness to Chakra enhanced electrical shocks and he can repeat the same process again, and I would be helpless against it. I can't let him have the chance to use that move. This ends now!= Neji thought to himself.

Taking a few steps forward towards his opponent, Neji abruptly stopped moving and took up a strange battle stance. He drew his legs apart, bend them at the knee and curved his body forward, stretching his left arm forward with his upper body until it almost touched his feet while his right arm was left stretched upward behind him. It was the classic Hyuuga stance for one of their bloodline techniques.

"It's over. You are within the field of my Hakke..." Neji stated as narrowed his eyes in preparation. "Hakkeshou: Rokujuu Yonshou (Hand of the Eight Divinations: Sixty-four Palms)!!" Neji yelled as he immediately launched himself into the sequence of prearranged movements, pressing all of Naruto's Tenketsu all at one go.

"Hakke Two hands!"

What looked like a dance to all the crowd members was a deadly attack that would render the victim unable to mold any chakra for a temporary period of time.

"Four hands!"

Naruto tried to avoid the hits but it was no use.

"Eight hands!"

His speed (even at its highest) was unable to help him dodge the impressive manoeuvres made by the Hyuuga prodigy as he determinately continued to strike one opening point after another.

"Sixteen hands!"

Naruto yelled as he felt all the Tenketsu within his arms close suddenly.

"Thirty-two hands!"

Naruto shut his eyes tightly, knowing that there was nothing he could do now that his hands were unable to mould any chakra, let alone perform seals.

"Sixty-four hands!"

Naruto landed roughly on his back, trying to catch his breath as he felt pain from all corners of his body.

"I have hit all 64 points in your body. You should no longer be able to stand, let alone try anything else." Neji said coolly, once again, having his ice-cold mask firmly in place.

Taking some time to look over his opponent, Neji mentally thought to himself. =Naruto had been a worthy opponent, but still, destiny was on my side and destiny dictates that I am the true victor.= Turning away from Naruto, Neji looked sternly at Genma. "Examiner. It's over."

"No...it's not..." Naruto murmured out as he struggled to his feet. First, using his hands to lift his upper body up, bent his knees to straighten his back, then slowly but surely, Naruto stood up on shaky legs. He lifted his head high and looked straight into Neji's eyes with

a determination unmatched by anyone Neji had ever met, the look could even rival Lee's.

"Why do you push yourself? You know that it is your fate to lose and my fate to win. You know the result of this fight already." Neji asked impassively.

"You..." Naruto's eyes softened slightly. "You have the same eyes as me... or at least... the same eyes that I once had.." He clarified ambiguously. Looking at Neji's slightly confused expression, Naruto tried to explain. "The eyes of a loner, of one who suffers silently, of one who has seen too much, heard too much, beared too much on his shoulders. I know that look, the look of loneliness, pain and a deep-seated frustration and anger. You're like me... a prisoner in your own body. A caged creature, struggling for freedom, one who was cursed since the moment he was born."

Neji narrowed his eyes in complete fury. It wasn't that Naruto had just insulted him; it was just that through out Naruto's speech, he really seemed as if he understood Neji, which was unsettling. Even with the Byakugan and all of its ability at reading the enemy's motives, Neji couldn't tell what Naruto was fighting for, and yet, Naruto could read him so clearly like an open book. He was in rage, that someone, namely this stranger, was able to pinpoint his weakness so quickly and effortlessly, disconcerting.

"WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW!!?" He yelled. "You don't know anything! Some people are born with burdens that they cannot oppose. You could never understand what it's like!" Shutting his eyes tightly, Neji tried to suppress memories of his father - the pain and the suffering he had went through, all the suppressed hate for the main family - he forcefully willed these painful reminders that he was truly a prisoner away. Suppressing tears that he refused to allow to fall; Neji opened his eyes to glare hatefully once more at Naruto. "You could never understand what it's like to be burdened with a symbol you hate, a symbol that you could never rid yourself of!!" He roared as he pointed his index finger at Naruto.

"YOU'RE WRONG!!" Naruto's anguished cry could be heard through out the entire stadium and all the audiences watching were silenced instantly. In a softer voice, he continued: "The future is not a straight line, Neji. It has many inter crossing pathways in which we may make our own decisions and have an impact on the resulting future. If a human's will is strong enough, he can defy destiny!" Looking back at Neji's cold, unblinking eyes, Naruto took a few moments to gather his breath. "That's what I believe..."

Within Naruto's mind, he earnestly debated with himself. =I have to do something... I can't just let him suffer like this any longer... I just have to do something... but how? I can barely move! All of my Tenketsu are closed! How am I supposed to knock some sense into him if I can't even reach him!?= Naruto thought frantically, and then, suddenly, a memory of what his Aunt had told him previously came back to him.

[FLASHBACK]

"You need to learn how to rely on your other sources of power, namely, the beast that resides in you. It's about time you learn how to draw out the Kyuubi's power to your fullest efficiency."

[END FLASHBACK]

=The Kyuubi! Of course!!! Aunt Ruri purposely told me that just before the exam! She knew I was going to be in this predicament, she knew I needed to hear those words!= Naruto realised, feeling very happy at the notion that his Aunt would care enough to give him this extra hint. He lowered his head slightly, hiding the gentle smile he now displayed on his face. =Thank you, Aunt Ruri. I won't disappoint you.= Naruto thought vehemently.

Shutting his eyes, Naruto held both his hands together in a simple seal. Concentrating hard, he rid himself of all his emotional baggage at the moment, freeing his mind and emptying his soul. Then and only then, did he try to communication with his other half...

"Kyuubi? Kyuubi!" His voice called out to the darkness.

"**I hear you...**" A deep, snarling voice echoed back.

" *I need your help...* " Naruto's voice drifted back, almost unwillingly. "*I need some extra chakra...* "

Kyuubi's voice chuckled back. "**Heh... All you needed to do, Kit... was ask...**"

Naruto then returned to the real world, feeling a huge surge of power flooding from inside of him. Lifting his head and looking at Neji's shocked expression, Naruto smirked. "Hey Neji!" Naruto called, now having the other's boy's attention on him, he continued his taunting. "I told you before... we were the same. But unlike you, I believe that people can change their destinies. When you have the strength and the will, you can rewrite your own destiny."

Neji on the other hand, had been watching, with avid bewilderment, at how a huge quantity of chakra (red, not the normal blue) suddenly surged out of Naruto's body. Spiralling out of Naruto's belly like wild fire, the excess chakra quickly overloaded and overflowed Naruto's natural body size, spilling out into the surrounding environment. Minor cuts and bruises immediately healed up using the surplus chakra as fuel. Following that, the untamed flame like chakra suddenly morphed itself into nine flapping, waving entities, all surrounding the still burning Naruto. They wrapped themselves around the blonde haired boy as if protecting him from outside influences, and then seemingly merged back into Naruto's body where it once originated.

"I know what it's like to carry a symbol that you detest, but can never be rid of... and I accept that truth. I accept it as another challenge in life; I accept that burden and will (to the best of my ability) defy the course of destiny that fate has laid out in front of me. Nothing and no one can break my resolve, for I am Uzumaki Naruto! Remember it!" Naruto finalised his speech before leaping into action.

With an exponential burst of speed, Naruto seemingly disappeared from view, when in fact; he had run to the other side of the stadium in less than one tenth of a second. Seeing his opportunity, he withdrew and threw three power-enhanced kunais at Neji. Knowing that Neji could easily deflect his kunais, Naruto's main aim in the move was just to kick Neji out of his stupor, not to harm him.

Alternatively, Neji had finally pulled himself out of his astonished paralysis. Never in his life, had he ever known anyone who could still summon forth chakra after all their Tenketsu have been closed, not to mention the unique way that Naruto had beckoned his. Watching the kunais flying directly at him with his Byakugan, Neji performed the Kaiten to deflect the blow. However, to his further astonishment, the kunais were not completely deflected without harm. Since these were power-enhanced kunais, their speed and force that impacted on the Kaiten created a large explosion, resulting in three small craters (1 metre in diameter) all around the original Kaiten circle.

Having caught the now normal kunais in his hand, Neji threw them back at Naruto, who quickly disappeared to the side to avoid the volley of flying weapons. =DAMN! HIS SPEED IS INCREDIBLE!!= Neji frantically analysed, losing his composure after watching Naruto's incredible feat.

Quickly jumping to one side, dodging what his Byakugan saw as Naruto's fist, Neji paused for a tenth of a second too long, for Naruto had already reappeared behind him in that instant. Immediately moving away as fast as he could to avoid whatever blow Naruto has up his sleeve, Neji was still a tad too slow.

"Tenshi no Doki!" Naruto shouted as he swung his right arm in an arc, directed at Neji, while still standing in the same position. With his Byakugan still activated, Neji's eyes widened slightly as he watched a wave of chakra mixed in with air particles leave Naruto's arm, flying through the air like a condensed wind slash (4), heading directly towards him. Without any time or distance to create the Kaiten, Neji quickly crossed both his arms across his chest and ducked his head waiting for the attack to hit. He didn't have to wait

long, for a second later, he was slammed onto the arena's wall by the impact of the technique Naruto had just used against him.

Bruised, battered and out of breath, Neji pulled himself out of the wall's crater (which had been formed when he crash landed on it) by sheer will alone. He stood up proudly though on unsteady legs and glared at Naruto with his enhanced eyesight. Taking several steps forward, Neji stopped approaching when he was four metres away from Naruto's position. He then finally spoke with an intensity rarely heard from his voice. "Prove to me what you believe in. Prove to me your word's worth."

Naruto narrowed his eyes and replied back just as vehemently: "I will."

With that said, Naruto readied one of his most powerful techniques, the Rasengan, while Neji prepared himself for the strongest Kaiten he had ever dared to create. Once the Rasengan was formed in the middle of his right hand, Naruto launched himself at Neji, who was already in the process of forming his Kaiten.

"RASENGAN!!!!!" Naruto yelled as he pushed his Rasengan into the spinning sphere of the Kaiten barrier.

Both forces slammed into one another and the resulting explosion rocked the entire stadium like an earthquake. The entire audience whom had been silently watching the fight before hand erupted with murmurs and cries as they were startled by the sheer power that these Genins could pack. Many of them had stood up in their seats, trying to find out what had happened to the two combatants while thick smoke and sand particles covered the arena, hiding everything from view.

Once the smoke and dust had cleared, almost all of the audience gasped in shock at what they saw. From the centre of the battlement in which both combatants had made their final stance just a few seconds prior, there was a large groove on the ground stretching from the centre of the arena to the stadium wall, where a big impact

crater can be seen at the juncture between the earth and the wall. The groove looked like it had been roughly made and large enough to indicate that a shortish human had been dragged through it at an incredibly high speed and with immeasurable power.

Naruto kneeled on the centre of the original impact crater in the middle of the arena, heaving as his tired body tried to catch its breath. His once pristine white clothes were now completely covered in dust, dried blood and soot, ruining his previous image as a dignified Air diplomat. Now, he was simply seen as any other normal Ninja, just a very powerful one. Gathering his strength, Naruto struggled onto his feet and trudged his way towards where Neji had landed, right in the middle of the stadium wall impact crater.

Once reaching his destination, Naruto gazed silently at his fellow combatant, now lying unmoving on the dirty ground, but still awake and coherent about his immediate surroundings. "You held back..." was all Neji managed to say.

Naruto nodded and dropped with a sigh onto the ground next to the battered boy. "Yeah... But so did you..."

Neji tried to shake his head, but couldn't find the energy and so he decided to use his coarse voice instead. "No... I gave it my all..." He struggled to pull the words out of his dry mouth.

"If you had really wanted to defeat me, Neji, you could have, you would have, but you didn't. There were many chances between us that this battle could have swung in whichever way, if we had taken those chances in the first place, but we didn't. Don't you see, Neji, it was our choices that led to this future. I didn't want to lose... and you did..." Naruto explained in a drained voice.

There was a long pause in silence between the two boys while the crowd watching the fight cheered on with vigour at their performance and the examiner had already declared Naruto as the victor of this fight since he could still stand, even if unsteadily. The Medic Ninjas

(with Haku at the forefront) were also making their way hastily towards where the two boys were situated.

Finally, by the time the medic Nins had strapped Neji comfortably onto the carrier, Neji had concluded the argument within his mind after reviewing all the actions that he had previously taken. He whispered to himself: "Yeah... I had wanted to be proven wrong... I did want to lose..." He then allowed himself a gentle smile and soon fell into an unconscious state.

Haku had stayed back after the other medic Ninjas carried Neji away, and fussed about Naruto's injuries as both boys walked back towards the waiting area. Pausing to grab the white cloak he had dropped since the start of his match, Naruto took a moment to look up at the VIP stand and gazed directly at his aunt. He saw her give him a short nod in acknowledgement and he smiled back with brilliant grin on his face. =She's proud of me...= was the thought that ran through his head.

Reaching the waiting area, Haku took a moment to heal most of Naruto's recent injuries (there weren't that many since Kyuubi's chakra had already taken care of most of them). Once done, the ex-mist Ninja gave Naruto his congratulations and left to attend to his other patient.

"Congratulations! Naruto-kun! That was a fantastic fight!" Sakura cheered as he made his way towards her.

"Thank you. Sakura," Naruto replied back earnestly.

"Yeah... I use to think you were a lame-ass type like me... Heh... now look at ya. You'd probably be able to kick anyone's butt..." Shikamaru drawled in his lazy tone of voice as he slumped forward onto the railing.

Shino only gave Naruto a short nod of congratulations as his reply, and Naruto nodded back in acknowledgement.

"By the way, Naruto-kun," Sakura interrupted again as her eyes scanned the entire crowd watching the arena. "Have you seen Sasuke?" She asked worriedly.

Naruto shook his head. "I haven't seen him since I left to go with Jiraiya. But I don't think he'd be the type to miss his own match, so don't worry about it, Sakura. He'll definitely be here on time. If worse comes to worse, his match up will probably be pushed back until the last round." Naruto detailed, as if thinking aloud. Personally, he had not noticed that his other teammate was not here beforehand so it was also a surprise for him, though not a major one, considering they did have Kakashi as their official sensei.

Just as Naruto predicted, the Hokage and Kazekage had agreed to push back Sasuke and Gaara's match until the last match of the first round, which meant that it's time for Sakura and that Sound Nin's turn to fight.

"Ah man..." Shikamaru winced. "That means that my match has moved up one!" He grumbled to himself under his breath but didn't do any other physical demonstration of his frustrations. It was just too troublesome anyway.

Glancing at the slightly nervous Sakura, Naruto patted her on her shoulder in support. "Do your best, Sakura! I know you can beat him. I have faith in you!"

Sakura gave him a tight-lipped smile and a nod of encouragement before jumping over the railing and landing lightly onto the ground below. Dosu, the sound Nin, had copied the move and was now, also down at the centre of the arena.

"Okay! Match Two, Haruno Sakura versus Dosu Kinuta. Begin!" Genma yelled as the audience quieten down to watch this match.

[End.]

(1) Just in case someone is wondering, remember how Sasuke's Gokakyuu no Jutsu was neutralised by Naruto's Rasengan when they fought on top of the Konoha Hospital. Well, this is the same theory. If spinning Chakra can be used to control air molecules (like it does in the Kaiten to deflect weapons), it should be able to suck up the air used during the combustion of fire, therefore neutralising the attack.

(2) If you're wondering what it looks like, here's a short description: Two circles, one placed inside the other. A five-pointed star drawn into the centre of the inner circle, with tiny words of prayer (Sanskrit - Ancient Hindu Writing) written between the two circles, surrounding the star. In the centre of the five pointed star, Ruri writes the character for 'Seal' and in each of the 5 pointed ends of the star, she wrote down the words: Ten (Heaven), Kun (Warriors), No (belonging / of), Bu and Ki (Weapons).

(3) Anything made out of chakra can easily be bypassed or destroyed using chakra. Neji released his chakra from the opening points located on his back to create a barrier. Naruto's palms are now infused with chakra, converted into lightning or electricity, so his chakra covered hands can bypass the barrier and enter the very Tenketsus that Neji had used in the first place.

(4) If anyone is familiar with Houshin Engi, this move was inspired by Taikoubou's Dashinban move.

I know. Evil Cliffie. But the chapter was already 15 pages long and I didn't really want to drag it out too much longer since I've got review replies to add as well. Anyway, I've already started working on the next chapter, so be patient, it will come when it is finished and edited. Once again, please read and review, I live on review. nn

On another note, I've updated the gallery on my page with a few more pics - namely, that of Kaga if anyone is interested. Once again,

if you're looking for the address it is:

www (dot) angelfire (dot) com (forward slash) anime3 (forward slash)
karrafear (forward slash) karrafear (underscore) fanfiction (forward
slash) faith (underscore) gallery (dot) htm [not html]

Chapter 16

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Sixteen: Chuunin Exam Pt2

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

Dibetssu, Night-Owl123, Wormkaizer, Toki Mirage, babowonsuni, Loon Luu (some of your jutsus have been planned to appear in the 2nd Arc of faith, I promise), hmr, The Dark Necromancer, Gopu, anonymous, SaLLy11, Dragon Noir, nonengel, stoictimer, loveinItStrong, Moonlight's Shadow, I-laze, Sierra-Falls, inu-chan 613, Kitty Meow: Thank you all so very much! I appreciate every single review. They always boost my confidence and push me further to keep on writing. Thank you everyone!

Hitomi no Ryu: I called it Kuunokigakure because Kuuki ('kong qi' in Chinese) literary mean 'Air' itself, and I wanted it more to do with space ('kong jian'), so I placed a 'No' (zi) in between to make it translate into something like 'Air within the Space'. Hope you don't mind. Konoha is the same as well, it literary translate to 'Leaf of Wood' instead of the just the 'Leaf'. nn;; Thanks again for volunteering to provide me with a group, I've also asked some other authors of Naruto fics to help out if they can so you don't have to push yourself too hard. Arigato!

Refused: Sakura already knows about Naruto having relations with the Air village because when he was teaching both Sasuke and her some of his techniques back in the Wave country, he had explained

first hand that the jutsus he'll be teaching them are unique to the Air village, and not the Leaf. When asked to further explain his exact relationship with the Air village, Naruto refused. As for Shikamaru, he already knows, since he has been training with Kaga. And Shino... well, he never struck me as the type that would ask questions... Anyway, good question, I should have explained that somewhere in the story, but I forgot. nn;;

One Azn Dragon: Yes, another reviewer have already stated that all the blood rushes up into the head during handstands, but then again, I always thought that since they can manipulate their charka within their body, there's no reason that they can't use that chakra to help them maintain their bloodstreams, heartbeat and other bodily functions. nn;;

Warriorphantom: 'Cool and observant' Naruto has always been a mask that the Naruto of this story wears to keep his emotions in tact. After suffering the loss of Ellie, the horror of his first kill, self-hatred, depression, etc. I'd say that Naruto tries his very best to hide his emotions while still staying a functional person in society. However, whenever he meets up with people he sympathises with, then he looses that façade a bit. People like Neji and Gaara relate to Naruto and he always have a softer spot showing when he confronts them. It's the same with Haku. No, I am not going to completely remove the Tenkun summons... nn;; Just because Naruto can't , doesn't mean Ruri won't... As for whether or not Naruto will participate in the upcoming war, that is for him to decide. Ruri can try to persuade him but she won't force him. The meeting with Tsunade WILL be very interesting because I'm adding extra bits that the original Naruto plot didn't include and I'm speeding every thing up at least 3 times. Hopefully, you'll enjoy that bit even more than the original. Thanks for the review.

Insanity: Yeah, I do get some of the 's' and 'z' mixed up. It's mainly because I'm Australian, so I learn the proper English using the 's', however, my Microsoft word sometimes doesn't recognise the 's' and it automatically changes it back to 'z'. I couldn't be bothered with

changing all of them back and seeing the annoying red lines underneath so I left them. nn;; It is very interesting the interactions and the relationships between the 'Prophet' house and the 'Breed' house. I wanted to have a division of the Uzumaki that didn't follow the Hyuuga style and yet still show the difference of responsibility and the hardships undergone by both. The Uzumaki family will be looked at in more detail when Tsunade is introduced. Why? You'll find out. Yes, I have read chapter 225, and I don't like the implications that Sasuke is willing to 'become' his brother just so he can 'kill' his brother, isn't that just defeating the purpose. You kill one monster by becoming a monster... I just hope Naruto can kick his ass! . ;; And yes, I LOVE the 'seal of tainted blood', not sure whether I'll be using it on Sasuke or Itachi though... nn;; Uh... yeah... stupid Genma... Orochimaru won't dare to touch Naruto as long as he is recognised as the heir to the Uzumaki clan. The Hidden Air village Shinobis are very protective of their Lady Oracle and any member of the 'Prophet' house, more so than the 'Breed'. And if he dares lay one finger on him, he's gonna get more than just the 10 Guardians after his hide. Naruto was holding back on the Tenshi no Doki, but that's partly because he doesn't want to hurt Neji too much and partly because he still finds it difficult to control. That's why he usually uses 'swings' of wind slash instead of a 'pin-point' accurate spear - higher chance of hitting his opponent. Thanks for the new jutsus, I'll see where I can place them later. Arigato!

OpposingForce: To tell you the truth, I surprised even myself when I started writing that so many people praised me for my action scenes. In fact, half the time, that's all they want to read... TT;; Before Faith, I have never really tried to write action sequences before... so even I'm not sure why mine are so sought after. The trick to it (for me anyway) is that I visualise it in real action (as in the Naruto anime style) and literary describe what each character is doing (e.g. twisting of the ankle, somersault up and backwards, roundhouse kick), it's the 'sequence' of movements that's really important, don't make any unnecessary action that seems to be there for no particular point. It also helps that I can draw stick figures that follow the sequence and test it out. Oo;; Actually, I really like your story! In

fact, I think it has a lot of character! If you think I'm good at action, then I'd like to take the time and say that you're a hell of a lot better at Romance than I am... nn;; I don't even know whether I can make it work for Faith or not, romance just isn't my thing... Arigato for your heartfelt support, I really appreciate it and I also wish the best of luck on your story as well.

Depressedinsomniac: I'm sure that your story is good too! OO Believe it or not, this particular story of mine seems to be a fluke in itself, I have no idea why so many people love it! Personally, if my other stories reach 20 reviews, I'd already be happy. ==;; Keep on trying to improve yourself and you will see results! Wish you all the best!

Dargon Sheinto: You got confused between the Gokakyu no Jutsu and the Chidori. In the manga, Kakashi interrupted them when Sasuke was using the Chidori against Naruto, not the Gokakyu no Jutsu. In fact, Sasuke had already used the Gokakyu no Jutsu before (the fire blast, remember) and yeah, it was neutralised by Naruto's Rasengan. Just a simple misunderstanding, that's all. I hope you enjoy the rest of the story.

InuSaiyan: Oh my god! Finally, someone commented on my drawings! XD I was wondering if anyone actually liked the drawings or not... since no one was coming back with any comments what so ever, at least now, I know you guys are looking at it. I know I portrayed them the way I pictured them, I just hope the rest of you view it the same way. Thank you so much for your support. I do try my best to keep Naruto as (what I term) realistic as possible. And yeah, even I miss the rambunctious and hyperactive Naruto now and then, but until this Naruto feels completely secure in himself and his surroundings, I don't think he'll ever revert back to his childlike innocence... TT So sad!

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. Yeah! Sakura versus Dosu and Shikamaru versus Temari! Enjoy!

= = means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

[...] Flashback scenes

Chapter 16

Previously in the last chapter

*"Okay! Match Two, Haruno Sakura versus Dosu Kinuta. Begin!"
Genma yelled as the audience quieten down to watch this match.*

ALL NEW

Both combatants stood opposite each other, eying the other and taking in every detail. Each knew of the other's weaknesses and strengths, but how much the other had improved during the one-month period was still a mystery.

=Let's see.= Sakura took a few seconds to remind herself of her opponent's fighting style and techniques from their previous battles.
=This guy is mainly a close combat specialist. As long as he is within range, he can use that odd metal thing to attack my ears with sound. There's no way for me to block that type of attack so I have to stay far away from it. Not to mention, I can't see the sound waves so he could theoretically control it through the air in every possible way and attack me from any angle. I can't do what Shikamaru did last time, by taking over his body and control it as I wish, but I can hide myself so he can't find me! As long as he doesn't know where I am, he can't hurt me.= Thought Sakura resolutely.

As if waiting for a hidden signal, both Sakura and Dosu suddenly launched into their battle plans. Sakura finished a set of seals in record time and called out: "Gen-Bunshin no Jutsu! (Illusionary Replication Technique)!" Instantly, four other Sakuras appeared out of nowhere, two in front of the original and two behind. Straight after that, the real Sakura continued with another set of seals. This time, it was the Invisibility Genjutsu. Her body quickly started fading out of existence leaving behind no trace of her. (1)

Dosu, on the other hand, had quickly pulled up his left arm's large sleeve to reveal a second odd-looking metal device. (2) Raising his left hand up, in front of him, Dosu used his remaining right hand to make a concentration seal. Closing his eyes in focus, Dosu summoned forth a new technique. Immediately following that move, a deep humming sound was emitted from the metal device as the sound waves travelled out in a sphere like direction towards all angles from the epicentre of Dosu's original location.

Sakura, hiding her presence with the Invisibility Genjutsu decided to just sit back a bit and watch what Dosu was up to. She made her Illusionary Bunshins launch themselves at Dosu; trying to trick him into thinking they were real and was about to attack him. However, to her surprise, Dosu didn't move an inch as the Illusion's punches and kicks all passed through him without incident. It was as if he knew they weren't real.

Changing her plans slightly, Sakura had her Illusions throw Kunai at the still un-moving Dosu, when in reality, she had been the one that had thrown her control-enhanced Kunai following the paths that the Illusions would have thrown theirs.

Dosu, as if sensing the real thing coming towards him this time, easily dodged the Kunai, still with his eyes completely closed. Confused, Sakura decided to weave her Kunai back in the direction of Dosu using her Chakra controlled strings, just to keep him occupied while she tries to think of something else that could work. Unfortunately for her, Dosu (eyes still closed) seemingly dodged the

Kunai a second time, and suddenly lunged towards her invisible location, rushing towards her at high speed.

In her panic and confusion, Sakura quickly jumped away, doing her best to avoid any sound attacks that he might have created if ever given the chance to be within range. As she jumped, she lost her concentration on the Invisibility Jutsu and so the crowd was astonished to see her suddenly appearing out in the middle of the air for no apparent reason. Knowing that her position had been compromised, Sakura dispelled all her previous Illusions since they weren't able to do anything in the first place. She also redirected her Kunai at Dosu once again, hoping that she could get lucky had strike him down. What happened next surprised her completely.

Dosu raised his right arm's device (the same one he had used many times beforehand) and quickly released a large burst of sound waves towards the incoming Kunai. The waves of air vibration travelled through the air and impacted against the Kunai like a wall or barrier, instantly halting their movements and somehow rendering them to drop down to the ground harmlessly.

"HOW..." Sakura was stunned beyond belief. Some of her most powerful moves and it didn't even give him a scratch. =Impossible! How did he know where I am? What in the hell did he do to my Kunai??=

"Don't think you're tricks would work twice on me, little girl!" Dosu growled low in his throat as he glared at the pink haired girl. "I have been training intensively just so I could beat you and prove to your precious little Uchiha that he damn well better be prepared to face me!" He suddenly smirked and continued to threaten Sakura with a slightly insane glint in his eyes. "I don't really care if I become a Chuunin or not, but I will take my revenge on you and Uchiha! So be prepared to die! Once I'm finished with you, I'll start hunting him. I'll prove to you all what's my worth."

Sakura shuddered at the intense maliciousness within Dosu's tone of voice. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm herself. She really

needed to defeat him, if not for herself, then at least for her teammates. She couldn't afford to lose here. =Calm Down Sakura.= She commanded herself. =Let's think this through logically. He can sense what is an illusion and what isn't. HOW??=

"Why are you after us? What was Orochimaru planning on doing to Sasuke?" Sakura asked, stalling for time as she quickly re-analysed all the new information about Dosu's improved fighting style. =Sound! His attacks are sound! Of course! With his left arm thingy, he is able to emit a small humming sound or a super sonic wavelength in all direction. If something has mass or is solid, it will automatically repel the sound wave. And with his eyes closed, Dosu can pick up what object has mass and where it is from what he hears. It's just like how bats see in the dark, by emitting sound and when the same sound is reflected off cave walls and stuff, the bat automatically knows not to ram itself into the wall! That's how he was able to tell which are illusions and which are real!= Sakura thought to herself triumphantly.

=Okay. Now for the other bit... How was he able to dispel my Chakra control-enhanced Kunai? Think sound! Think sound! Aha! God! I'm a genius! He uses his Chakra to control the sound waves, right? Then he should be able to use the same Chakra to sever my Chakra from the kunai easily. What's made up of Chakra can easily be destroyed by placing Chakra into it, or in this sense, mixing the two Chakra signatures in mid air and severing my influence over the Kunai. However, being unable to use the Chakra-enhanced Kunai like I do, he simply drops them harmlessly onto the floor.= Sakura concluded to herself, now, far more calm than she had been only moments ago.

"I don't know what Orochimaru want's with Uchiha. But by doublecrossing me, he too will find that I'm not just a guinea pig to be used and then discarded. Mark my words, as long as I'm alive, I will get my revenge one way or another." Dosu chuckled harshly at his own words and once again glared at Sakura with all his worth. =Oh! This is going to be fun ripping you apart!= He thought as he lunged at her once again.

=SHIT!= Sakura thought, jumping back and throwing four sharp metal needles at Dosu at the same time. Her precision with metal needles was much more accurate than Kunai since Sakura had practiced continuously with their use during her one month training period. Even without consciously doing so, Sakura's aim was perfect in their execution, directed at vital points in the hope of stopping her opponent's body movements.

Dosu managed to block two of her needles from piercing his chest but missed the other two that had stabbed into his thigh. Thinking that was all, Dosu tried to run after Sakura but suddenly collapsed as his legs refuse to hold up the rest of his body weight. Temporarily immobilised, Dosu frantically tried to reach the two needles still attached to his body, attempting to pull them out so that he can move his legs once more.

The needles, long and incredibly sharp, had embedded itself into two very important veins and opening points within the body's Chakra circulatory system. It had pierced deeply into the thigh muscle and remained stuck even while Dosu tried to pull it out from a very awkward angle.

Pressing her advantage, Sakura finally made an offensive move for the first time during this battle. Her hands moved quickly over a set of difficult to make hand seals. Once she had finished, she directed her last seal at the still flailing Dosu and whispered her newly learnt technique: "Mukaku no Jutsu (Blind Senses Technique)!"

She could the familiar burst of Chakra flowing out of the palm of her hands, floating through the air at a substantially slower rate than Ino's Shintenshin no Jutsu (Mind body switch) (3). Luckily for her, Dosu was too busy pulling the needles out of his leg to notice what Sakura had just done. He seemed to be in a very emotionally unstable state of mind and therefore wasn't focussed enough on his surroundings.

The technique finally reached Dosu, and immediately, Sakura could see the effects happening on his body. His entire body stopped

moving as if it had simply frozen in time, his eyes had glazed into a greyish hue. And there he sat, unmoving, like a statue.

Knowing that time was against her, Sakura quickly got ready to finish off Dosu. Rushing at the now unmoving body, she pulled out four more needles and flung them at him, aiming at different place. After the first barrage, Sakura continued to fire needle after needle, all striking with meticulous precision at where she wanted them to land. She had aimed all her needles on all the important points within a human body. Some on the acupuncture points, some on the major veins and arteries, some on the Chakra inner coil system. Overall, by the time Sakura had finished her barrage of needles, she was already very low of Chakra. Deciding now would be a good time to release the Jutsu. Sakura quickly ran towards Dosu until she was directly behind him before performing the released seal (KAI).

When Dosu awakened from his Genjutsu haze, he discovered that his body was suffering from intense pain. Looking down, he was shocked at the number of needles his body now held within. Trying to move was no avail as both his arms and legs seem to be stiff as if no blood was flowing into them. His frantic cry was cut short as Sakura used all of her remaining Chakra to perform another set of seals and then lightly tapped him on his shoulder. "Kyousei Suimin no Jutsu (Forced Sleep Technique)." Dosu instantly dropped into a deep slumber.

Sighing in slight exhaustion and the emotional roller coaster ride she had just gone through, Sakura looked at the Examiner with an annoyed expression. "Well?!" She yelled at him, waiting impatiently for him to DO something.

Genma shrugged, not at all impressed by their performance, but he kept that thought to himself. "Dosu Kinuta is unable to battle. Winner: Haruno Sakura!"

The crowd cheered at another Leaf victory, though most of them didn't think that the fight had been that spectacular at all. Sakura only sighed in relieve at having passed the first round before she

made her way back up to the waiting area where the other participants are. Haku and the other medic Nins were just arriving to carry Dosu away when Haku gave Sakura a secret wink in congratulations. Sakura smiled at that and returned with a nod in thanks. They both went back to their appropriate places, waiting for the next match to begin.

"Kankuro versus Aburame Shino! Get down here now!" Genma called, irritated and bored out of his mind.

Above, in the waiting area where all the participants stand, awaiting their own matches, Kankuro shifted in nervousness. He looked back at his re-constructed Karasu (puppet) and thought to himself. =SHIT! This match doesn't even matter! But there'll be hell to pay if they found out about the gimmick I placed within Karasu before the signal is given!=

Glancing at his sister with a slightly desperate look, she only gave him back a tight lipped and stern expression. Quickly diverting his eyes back to the examiner, Kankuro called out clearly: "I forfeit!"

=What...= Genma frowned at the reply. He wasn't the only one.

Shino had already been on his way towards the stairs (instead of jumping off the railing) when he heard Kankuro. 'Happy' at the situation was NOT what Shino was feeling right now. In fact, he was feeling quiet put off, after training so hard with his father just to find out his opponent forfeited.

Naruto narrowed his eyes but didn't speak. He had already heard from his Aunt that there were going to be discrepancies during the Chuunin Exam. After all, he still kept in mind those three events in which his Aunt said could not be rectified, no matter what they did. =Sound will invade Konoha. The 3rd Hokage will die. And Shukaku will be awakened... If I put all three together, I'd harbour a guess that

Orochimaru is behind the attack, and somehow he has persuaded the Sand to help as well. If not, then Gaara and Shukaku would not have a role to play in this power struggle at all.= Naruto clenched his fist, the only sign that he was furious at the situation. =Why is it, that I still can't protect the people close to me??=

Shikamaru gapped at Kankuro's abrupt announcement, completely stumped at what to do. =Does that mean...= He thought to himself with a despairing tension in the air.

Not waiting for the same thought to sink into these people's minds, Temari grabbed her fan (strapped onto her back), unfolded it, waved it a bit to gather a large gust of wind and rode down to the arena floor on top of her huge fan as transport. There, she stood, confident and calm, waiting for her match to begin.

Genma looked at her with a dull expression and a raised eyebrow. "Looks like you're very eager to get your match on the way..." He huffed. "Fine. Nara Shikamaru! Get down here now!" He demanded, looking thoroughly annoyed.

Shikamaru continued to gap at the scene. =Didn't I have another match between us! What the hell! Oh man! This is soooo troublesome!!!= He was brought out of his astonishment when Naruto tapped him on his shoulder.

"Yo! Shikamaru! It's time for your match. Get down there now!" Naruto called cheerfully, carefully hiding his interest over Shikamaru's growth under the tutelage of Kaga, as well as the concern he felt for Konoha as a whole. He had overheard a conversation between his Aunt and Kaga before hand, talking about how Kaga-san had taught Shikamaru a special move. Naruto couldn't wait to see what Shikamaru had learnt, and how well he performed it.

Shaking his head out of his reverie, Shikamaru looked ruefully at Temari. =What's she getting so excited about?! Damn!= He rubbed

his head with irritation. =Man! What's with people these days!? They just can't wait! No one understands the concept of patience anymore! Well. If I really can't be bothered than I guess I could always forfeit like that other sand guy... How come I'm the one who always gets his match moved around all the time...= Shikamaru mentally complained to himself, ignoring the growing calls from the angry crowd, all calling him to 'hurry the hell up'.

Unfortunately for Shikamaru, that was the moment Sakura had finally returned to the waiting area. As she watched Shikamaru taking his sweet time thinking over whether or not he should accept the match, Sakura had lost her patience in waiting for him to acknowledge the fight. Forcefully shoving him forward, over the rail, Sakura called out to him enthusiastically, smirking all the way. "Alright! SHIKAMARU! GO FOR IT!!" =Let's see what you're teammate is capable of, Ino-pig!= She mentally thought to herself, wondering if there was a huge gap in comparison between her two teammates and Ino's two teammates.

Shikamaru landed with a thump onto the arena's floor in a very undignified manner. Above, in the waiting area, both Naruto and Sakura sweat dropped at his seeming ungracefulness. =You sure you've taught him some good moves, Kaga-san?= Naruto thought to himself sceptically, both his eyebrows raised in doubt.

Above all the gazing audiences, standing rather stiffly behind his mistress, Kaga winced slightly. Ruri, on the other hand, only held a small smile in amusement.

Shikamaru wasted several more seconds as he silently withstood all the different kinds of objects being thrown at him from the still fuming crowd. He frowned in distaste. =Man! Why should I bother? It's obvious that everyone wants to see Sasuke fight. They're all angry because they have to put up with this pathetic excuse for a match between two side acts before the main star even arrive... Since no one really cares about this fight, there's really no point to it, is

there...= Looking at his opponent's confident and smirking face, Shikamaru's frown deepened. =And on top of that, I have to fight a *girl* !=

Fed up with her opponent's slowness as well as the stagnation of this match, Temari decided to take things into her own hands. "If you won't start than I will!" She yelled as she began running towards his location, ignoring Genma's call that he hadn't officially started the match yet.

Shikamaru sighed as the approaching Temari cut down the distance between them rapidly. Pulling out two Kunai with one hand and another kunai in the other, Shikamaru readied himself to take the attack. Temari jumped high into the air, pulling her massive fan over her shoulder and down, she slammed her weapon right where Shikamaru had been situated. A loud 'bang' reverberated through out the stadium and smoke clouds covered the immediate area of the impact.

Once the smoke cleared, Temari's smirk also disappeared. "You know. I don't really want to fight..." She quickly lifted her head and glared at the seemingly impassive, dull face of her opponent, standing nonchalantly on top of two of his Kunai both stuck on the wall of the stadium.

"Hell. I don't even care if I become a Chuunin or not..." Shikamaru drawled out in a slightly uninterested voice. "However, a man shouldn't lose to a girl either..." Temari's glare intensified as her inner fury builds from listening to his sexist comments. "Well... I guess I will fight..." Shikamaru concluded to himself.

Unable to hold in her anger, Temari snarled as she quickly lifted her large fan off the ground, opening it to reveal all three 'stars', she was just about to flail her weapon across in a semi-circle arc when Shikamaru suddenly detached another of his Kunai and threw it towards her direction. Reacting instantly, Temari released a huge gust of wind to stop Shikamaru's assault as well as to attack Shikamaru himself, all in one blow.

Shikamaru's kunai had easily been deflected by the windblast. Flung by sheer power of Temari's technique towards many different directions, following the wind's current, the weapon finally landed unnoticed onto the ground many metres away, onto the middle of the arena. Its tip stabbing upright into the hard sands below.

Temari's eyes continued to narrow slightly as she surveyed the area of her destruction, noting that Shikamaru had escaped, leaving only his two Kunai behind. =He's fast at running away...= Temari thought to herself sarcastically.

Behind a near by tree within the battle arena compound, Shikamaru watched Temari silently and thought to himself. =Damn... A man shouldn't hit a woman with his fists... but I don't want to get beaten up by her either...= Sighing in exasperation, Shikamaru gazed up at the clouds hanging over the stadium longingly. =I envy the clouds... They are always so free... Going anywhere they please... I don't know why I even try... It's not like I have any determination at all... I only became a Ninja because I thought it would be a simple and easy life...= Shifting his gaze, Shikamaru looked around the stadium floor, and finally found his third kunai, now stationed all the way in the middle of the arena. Finally standing up from his crouching position, Shikamaru held a small smirk on his face. =But... I guess nothing is ever that simple.=

Infuriated at Shikamaru's dumb expression, Temari decided to wipe that smirk off his face. "Ninpou: Kamaitachi!! (Ninjutsu: Whirlwind attack)" She yelled as she swung her fan back and forth. A large blast of swirling wind slashed across the entire battlefield, creating deep cuts and profound gashes upon the surface of trees as well as the stadium walls, lifting up sand and dust and blowing them all over the place, creating clouds of smoke to obscure any visibility.

After her assault, however, a thin strip of 'shadow' - for that is exactly what its name recalls – emerged from the smoke cloud and climbs at rapid speeds towards Temari. Gasping slightly in surprise, Temari quickly pulled herself together. Realising that the 'shadow' was Shikamaru's technique, she swiftly performed several back flips,

neatly avoiding the 'shadow' from touching her feet. Suddenly, the 'shadow' stopped stretching and started receding back into the slowly uncovering dust cloud, revealing Shikamaru, still composed and not severely injured.

"Now I see", Temari concluded as she scrapped her fan across the ground, indicating where the maximum length of the shadow can be stretched up to. "I understand the secret behind the Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Copy Technique). There's a limit to the extent you can change the shape of your own shadow. No matter what your manipulation of your shadow is, it must still hold the same surface area as your original shadow. Am I right?" Temari inquired with a confident voice.

Shikamaru smirked in reply. "Yeah. You're right." He acted as if having his secret out was no big deal at all, which made Temari all the more suspicious and she took a few more minutes just analysing his technique. =Assuming that he used the wall's shadow to help him extend his own shadow, no matter whether he is standing at the edge of the available shadow or right next to the stadium wall itself, his own shadow would have the same maximum length, which is 15 metres and 32 centimetres.= Temari was sure of her calculations.

However, to her confusion, Shikamaru started making a strange hand gesture. =It's not a seal! It can't be a seal! What is he doing?= She thought to herself, slightly concerned as to what her opponent has up his sleeve.

Indeed, Shikamaru wasn't making any hand seal. It was his habit to use his hands to form a strange up-side-down circle, having all of his finger tips touching their counterparts and the thumbs touching one another, while he concentrate on finding strategies to help him during a tough battle. Usually, he only used this move when playing Go or Shogi against Asuma-sensei but this time, Shikamaru thought it might be good for him to just think before he act.

After a few more minutes of focussed thinking, Shikamaru finally released his hands from their strange positions and looked up at his

opponent with a calm and determined visage on his face.

"Looks like you're finally a bit more motivated to fight." Temari mocked with her still confident attitude at play. =Finally. Let's get this battle started!=

Shikamaru calmly reached back to grab two more Kunai as Temari reinstated her assaults from before. "Kamaitachi!! (Whirlwind attack)" She yelled as released another large gust of swirling wind blades, cutting across the arena at full force.

Shikamaru dodged most of the blows by hiding behind another tree; he first took off his jacket and head protected, readying his Kunai in wait for the right opportunity to present itself.

"You can't hide forever!" taunted Temari as she performed Kamaitachi after Kamaitachi; just to discharge some of her anger and frustration that had built up since the beginning of this match. Finally, tiring of all the useless assaults, Temari decided to stop attacking.

Immediately after she released her last Kamaitachi, a kunai was flung straight at her from Shikamaru's position, which was still obscured by clouds of dust and smoke. Slightly tired and gasping in surprise, Temari managed to dodge that kunai and opened her fan just in time to deflect a second kunai that had been aimed at her from a different angle.

Placing her fan back behind her, she was once again surprised at seeing Shikamaru launch his second attempt at capturing her with his Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Copy Technique). =Stupid. As long as I'm behind the line of his maximum stretch length, there's no way he can catch me...= Watching the shadow rapidly closing the distance between herself and it, Temari quickly reconsidered. =Wait a second... SHIT!= Jumping backwards in shock and a little bit of nervousness, Temari gapping at how easily the 'shadow' stretched across her line by a whole metre and a half, and almost reached her position. Still gasping at the realisation of her almost defeat, she

glared at Shikamaru, clenching her teeth tightly in suppressed anxiety.

"Impressive. You were able to see through that move." Shikamaru praised.

"I see. You took your time to wait until the sun went down. This is so that the surface area of your own shadow, as well as the shadow of the stadium wall, would increase, enabling you to extend your influence over a larger distance of land." Temari listed as she analysed the new phenomenon. Shikamaru only 'hmp'hed in confirmation.

=Calculating from the height of the sun and the last maximum length he was able to produce, there is no doubt that this new length is the extent of his ability.= Temari thought to herself as she eyed the end of the 'shadow' resolutely. That is, before she was brought out of her musing by her younger brother shouting at her to look up. Gasping, Temari quickly looked up as her brother had commanded her to.

Above her, hiding behind the light of the sun, there seems to be a small black dot visible. =What's that?= Temari thought for an instant before she remembered that this object, whatever it was, would most definitely have a shadow of its own. Looking down again, her eyes widened at the small round shadow that had developed within the distance between herself and Shikamaru's shadow, and its surface area was still growing.

=Oh SHOOT!= Instantly jumping backward to evade the newly enhanced Kagemane no Jutsu, Temari tried to jump to the side to avoid the shadow, hoping that it would pass her by going straight. No such luck. The 'shadow' followed her resolutely, to the right, to the left, and always moving backwards constantly. =Who would have thought...= Temari thought frantically to herself. =That he would use his clothes as a parachute just so he could extend the uses of his shadow. Damn. Definitely a very impressive guy...= She admitted silently to herself. =If I had completely focused my attention on the parachute in the sky, then I would have lost my concentration on the

shadow below. He left absolutely no room for me to evade!= She calmed herself forcefully, analysing everything she had learnt over the past few minutes of the fight while still dodging the unrepentant 'shadow' following her. =But now it's very clear... The Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Copy Technique) is simply a Jutsu that uses different Shadows to trap their opponents.=

Watching the 'shadow' finally recede back from her new position much farther away than her original resting place, Temari released her fan (a short gust of wind followed the movement) and placed it gently behind her. She smirked at Shikamaru, hiding all of her other emotional states from his previous heart-thumping assault. Shikamaru, on the other hand, frowned slightly. "So, she dodged that one too, uh?"

Looking back up at the slowly setting sun, Temari theorised to herself. =As long as this fight continues, the shadow of the stadium wall will expand, his own shadow surface area will also expand, and thus, his territory of control expands. Which ever way I see it, I lose ultimately.= Lifting her fan up again, she stomped it back down, in front of her blocking any weapons if Shikamaru even tried to throw them. =I'll have to finish it in my next move.= She thought to herself resolutely.

=First I'll create a Bunshin and let him think that it's the real me. Once his attention is distracted to the Bunshin, I'll attack him head on.= Glancing out from behind her fan, Temari watched as Shikamaru completely dissipated his shadow, Temari concluded that now would be the best time to attack. Placing her hands together, she tried to complete her Bunshin no Jutsu (Replication Technique) but found herself suddenly unable to move. =WHAT THE!!! IMPOSSIBLE!!=

Silence reigned through out the entire stadium as everyone's attention was focused on what was happening within the centre of the battle arena. No one spoke, no one blinked, for they believe that if they blinked, they would have missed out on the action. And

indeed, if they had blinked, they would have missed out the most important move that Shikamaru had done in the entire match.

Still stunned into silence and unable to move a single muscle in her body, Temari's mind ran up all the possibilities but came up with no solution. =NO WAY?! MY BODY!! HOW!!??=

Unexpectedly, a nasal voice spoke up behind her, startling her out of her reverie. "It's about time. Kagemane no Jutsu, a success." The voice, distinctly belonging to Shikamaru, called up from behind her.

Standing up and then turning around stiffly as if she was a puppet simply following her master's move, Temari looked up in horror at the face of her opponent. "But how!? Why!! How did you..." She couldn't comprehend how he had managed to get behind her when an instant earlier, he had been several metres in front of her. She had made sure of it.

Shikamaru only smirked slightly in return. He bent down and picked up something from the ground, Temari followed the same move but in the opposite direction. As they both returned to their up right positions, she glanced at what he had pulled out off the ground in the first place. It was just an ordinary kunai, or at least, that's what Temari thought at first. Holding the kunai in one hand, Shikamaru used his other hand to peel a small black note from the handle of the kunai. Temari followed with the same ridiculous gesture, only she had nothing in her hands while he does. Lifting the note up, he displayed its written contents for Temari to view. Her confused expression was obvious as she gazed back at the strange design drawn on the small 10-centimetre by 10-centimetre sheet of black paper with white chalk writing on top. (4)

"This is a neat little trick I learnt from someone, it's called the 'Kage Michi' (Way of the Shadows). It enables me to literary walk through shadows, like a special teleportation Jutsu. As long as I place one of these Kunai with the special note attached at a certain shadowed area, and I myself hold on to another of these special notes, I am

able to travel into one shadow and out of the other shadow. That's how I was able to disappear from there (he pointed to the area of trees) and reappear over here." Shikamaru explained with a tired drawl.

=Impossible! He threw this particular kunai right at the beginning of the match, when I first launched at him! You mean... All of those previous Kagemane no Jutsu was just a ploy to move me here right into this area! Just so that you could teleport yourself all the way behind me and use the Kagemane again!! ... This guy!? How many subplots had he hatched against me just to manoeuvre me right into this area!?!=

Temari was still too shocked to physically reply as she went through everything that had happened in her match again. She was so focussed on her analysis that she didn't even fight back when Shikamaru raised his hand up into the air. However she did finally react when he drawled out again by stating: "That's it! I forfeit this match."

Above the battle arena, in the participant's waiting area, Sakura's eyes almost bulged out of her sockets. Inner Sakura screamed inside her head: "WHAT THE F--K!! What is he saying! The little IDIOT!!! I can't believe that he just wasted a perfect opportunity to beat it into that sand girl! How could he!?" Mentally, inner Sakura continued to rant while outwardly, Sakura was simply stunned into immobilisation.

The other Genin weren't fairing that much better. Shino had a deep frown on his face but made no other gesture to indicate any of his feelings on the matter. Gaara, too, didn't show any outwardly emotion on his face as he watched impassively. Kankuro, on the other hand, gave a visible sigh of relieve though he did sweat drop slightly at the initial announcement.

Naruto had a slight twitching in his right eye that refused to disappear. =He... he forfeited???? ... I... I can't believe... He

forfeited????!!!= The same thoughts circled around Naruto's mind endlessly.

After an almost unanimous call of 'NANI????' (WHAT????) by the majority of the audiences watching, some figures were still stunned by Shikamaru's sudden declaration.

Asuma sighed heavily to himself and tried to hide his face behind one hand. =Why... Why is he so... so unmotivated...= He thought to himself despairingly.

Kurenai could only pat Asuma on the shoulder sympathetically. She was glad that she didn't have Shikamaru as one of her own students.

Ino, sitting some seats down from Asuma and Kurenai, also had an open mouth, wide eyed expression on her face. Stumped would be the only word to describe her right about now.

Beside her, Choji was chuckling to himself while he continued to stuff his mouth full of chips and other assorted food that he had brought with him to the Exam. =I told you he'd give up.= He mentally thought to himself as he taunted the still visibly shocked Ino. =It's not Shikamaru's style to be so motivated to win. He'd give up once the chance shows itself. That's just the way he is...=

Above the general audience viewing area was the VIP platform. Ruri hid her smile of amusement behind one of her hands. She couldn't believe that this little boy was the new apprentice that Kaga had chosen to take on.

Behind her, Kaga had lowered his head in complete embarrassment, unable to even meet his mistress's eye. If his face hadn't been wrapped up in bandages, the clear pink hue of his skin would have been very visible.

The Hokage, on the other hand, had a slightly stunned expression on his face. =Shikamaru-kun... that move... The Kage Michi (Way of the Shadows)... it is not a Konoha technique... In fact, no one in the Hidden leaf can do this technique...= Looking sideways at Kaga, who still had his head lowered shamefully, the third Hokage smiled kindly. =Thank you Lady Uzumaki and Kaga-san. It seems as if even though you're not willing to involve yourselves into our problems, you're still willing to at least help our young. For that, you have my eternal gratitude.= He turned back to watching the end of the fight.

Next to him, the Kazekage glared at the undistinguished boy at the bottom of the arena floor. =How could... how could an unmotivated... a less talented... brat like him... managed to learn the Kage Michi?! Even I... haven't been able to master that technique... Through out history, only the Shadow Master Clans have been able to control such techniques. Even though the Nara clan is a very distant cousin of the original Shadow Masters, but there is no way that they could learn the original Shadow Master techniques, could they?=

"Wha... Why?" Temari stuttered out as she finally pulled all her wits together now that Shikamaru had released her from his Jutsu, or as much as she could find anyway.

Stretching his tired muscles, Shikamaru answered back nonchalantly. "I have very little Chakra left after the continuous use of Kagemane no Jutsu through out this match. I won't even be able to hold you for another 10 seconds longer. I've come up with 200 more moves from here on out but it seems I've run out of time. It's just too troublesome anyway. One match is enough for me..." He replied, and then turned around, slumping his shoulders as he made his way to the stairs once more.

Genma's lips twitched as if wanting to become a true smile. =What a strange guy... To win the fight but lose the match...= Closing his eyes for a short amount of time, he finally called out the results of this fight. "Shikamaru has forfeited the match. Winner: Temari!"

Walking dazedly back to her fan, Temari released a large gust of wind to carry her back up to the waiting area where her two brothers are. Once landed, she looked dazedly upon them as Kankuro congratulated her.

After a few minutes of waiting, Kankuro grew slightly nervous and asked: "Is he even gonna come? Or has he been scared off? Or..."

"Don't worry... He'll come," was Gaara's firm answer. And that left nothing more for the other two siblings to say.

As if Gaara's comment had been some kind of trigger, all of a sudden, a large gust of wind and leaves flew into the stadium and swarmed around the centre of the arena only to dissipate, revealing none other than Uchiha Sasuke and the Copycat Ninja Hatake Kakashi.

"Your name?" Genma asked with suppressed cheeriness.

"Uchiha Sasuke." Sasuke affirmed.

[End.]

(1) It is slightly different from Kurenai's Kishibari no Jutsu (Tree binding) technique that she used against Itachi. Unlike Kurenai, Sakura doesn't morph into smoke or anything like that, she literary fades out into the surrounding environment until nothing is left.

(2) Have any of your noticed that when ever Dosu attacked someone in the manga and the anime series, the metal object is on his RIGHT arm. So for this fic, I'm making up a new object on his LEFT arm.

(3) If you guys think that Ino's Shintenshin no Jutsu was slow, the Mukaku no Jutsu is about twice as slow.

(4) The intricate design is like this: There's a large circle, within is a square, and within the square is another circle. Inside that inner circle is the Kanji for 'Shadow' (Kage).

Oh my god! Now that that's over and done with, the next chapter will be about Gaara versus Sasuke and finally, the Sound and Sand invasion of Konoha! It's gonna be hell to write about! TT Um... yeah... Hope you guys liked this chapter. Please read and review.

Chapter 17

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafeear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Sixteen: Chuunin Exam Pt3

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

chibiKakashi, insanechildfanfic, FlareOfDragon, SaLLy11, Zero the Death Shadow, Night-Owl123, Skuld's Sentaro, Kitty Meow, Daniel of Lorien, Gopu, Emptysanity, Crutches, inu-chan613, Toki Mirage, Inusaiyan, Lec Nufrac, Sierra-Falls, jadedheart, anonymous, Dragon Noir, warriorphantom, hmr: Thank you everyone for Reviewing! Phew! That was my fastest update wasn't it! Anyway, here's the next one. Hope you all enjoy it!

Winged Knight: YES! I need a few more genin teams, but none from Leaf, Stone, Grass, Cloud or Sand! I'm sorry if it sounds like I'm imposing a lot of rules but you see, there's only gonna be 12 important teams, and so far 6 have already been made, and I should have 1 more coming along. So yeah, if you could, PLEASE help me by creating your own Genin team! Well, what you've got left is Sound, Snow, Rain, Waterfall, or Mist (or some other village you made up). Thank you very much for offering, and if you wish to send the info to me, email me at "shella(the 'at' symbol)iinet(dot)net(dot)au". THANKS A BUNCH!!!

DrunkenFistLee, Rage-of-Death and Dragon Shiento: Thank you three for complementing my drawings! I'm just happy that people are interested enough to actually go see it! I'm glad you all liked it so

much. Sorry that most of them are pencil though, I'm not that good at CG colouring and stuff.

Joekool: Actually, I stuck with 'Faith' since a lot of other people wanted it to stay the same, and anyway, after that, I thought about it a bit more and just went with the flow. So now, I personally call it the 'Faith' Arc because there are 3 major sections within.

Nonengel: Actually, Shikamaru forfeited for both reasons (laziness and for other reasons). Yes, he is lazy, but then again, Shikamaru isn't the type that would want to show off what he has learnt, so one match is enough for him to keep most of his secrets. Not to mention, he's also interested in finding out what his 'sensei' would think of his attitude if he did something that was unexpected.

Someone: Sakura doesn't consciously target the inner coil system because she can't see it. But, to me, she represents those types of book worms that have photographic memories and therefore, once she has studied them, her mind will forever remember them. When throwing her needles, she subconsciously target those weak areas automatically as her mind quickly calculate the risk factor and stuff like that, but she doesn't consciously do it like Shikamaru. That's why Sakura is so dangerous in that chapter because most of the time, she totally underestimates her own ability. If she were able to consciously control her body and analyse quickly what she would do in battles, then she would be a lot stronger than most people give her credit for.

Insanity2: (I take it you've got yourself a new account, congratulations!) About the Hyuuga Main Vs Branch conflict, I don't what you mean by most people would automatically think of the Uzumakis as having an inner-conflict of their own. When, in actuality, they don't. That's why I didn't use the words 'Main' and 'Branch'; instead, I used the meaning behind the family's purpose 'Prophet' (as in prophecy bearer) and 'Breed' (as in Breeder). Yeah, I REALLY DON'T LIKE how Sasuke has turned out. He was never one of my favourite characters but now; he truly has become one of my most hated, even more so than Orochimaru. I can't believe the level of his

selfishness and his STUPIDITY!!! . I agree with your description of Shika-kun! He's like that... completely unmotivated to even lift a finger unless he absolutely has to. Wow! 8th level of Rasengan, huh? Might be a bit too powerful, don't you think? Anyway, thank you always for reviewing. You've become my most faithful reviewer and I LOVE IT!!! Please be patient to wait for the next chapter after a short break where by I work on my other stuff. Thanks again!

OpposingForce: I'm glad I'm unpredictable! It's always good to know that no one else can guess what I'm going to do next. Hinata is in the stand watching the show, but I didn't want to deviate from the point of view that was focused on Naruto and Neji, so I didn't really mention her. In this story, Naruto didn't meet up with Hinata before the exam and so Hinata's point of view wasn't really needed. Not to mention, Kabuto never made a move against Hinata so she'll be sleeping with the rest of the gang. Yes, I am planning on having HinataXNaruto, but for now they both have a lot of other things to think about, Hinata to become strong and Naruto... well... to become strong... v.v;; They're still twelve so I'll leave them to their own thoughts for now. I'm actually planning on having their relations grow more towards close friendship (similar to Sakura and Naruto) during the second Arc where he has to protect her from the other Air nins and so he became something of a protector and mentor. You'll see what I mean when I get there... Hope you don't mind for the wait... I will most definitely be needing some help in the romance section when I get there, so you'll be the first I look up!

Hitomi no Ryu: Yes! I am the same person!! I did ask for help and one did reply back, now I've found another wonderful volunteer to help out. So soon enough, I should have at least another 2 or 3 teams fixed. If worse comes to worse, I guess I could always make up some more of my own, it's just that most of my OC are similar in personality! nn;; I've not variety... Anyway, as to why I was so quick on updating, I had that chapter finished even before I posted the previous one which is why it was so quick. I usually concentrate on writing 3 Naruto chapters, then take a small break to write my other one, before continuing with Naruto. So yeah, after this one, there'll

probably be a short 1 or 2 week break in between (maybe longer depending on my muse).

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. Sasuke Vs Gaara! Sound Invasion!!!
Enjoy!

= = means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

[...] Flashback scenes

Chapter 17

Previously on the last chapter.

"Your name?" Genma asked with suppressed cheeriness.

"Uchiha Sasuke." Sasuke affirmed.

ALL NEW!

"See... He came..." Gaara stated nonchalantly, while behind him, both Temari and Kankuro tensed in anticipation.

"Well, we showed up all flashy and the like... but uh... could we have been... disqualified?" Kakashi asked sheepishly, rubbing a hand behind his head as he sweat dropped concurrently.

Genma lifted an eyebrow in amusement. "Jeeze... your tardiness must be contagious." Shaking his head and giving off a heavy sigh, Genma returned his gaze back on Sasuke. "You're lucky kid. We

pushed your match until the end of all the other fights, so you're not disqualified."

"That's good to hear!" Kakashi laughed, feeling much relief that he hadn't inadvertently taken away his student's chance at taking part in the Chuunin Selection Exam.

However, while Kakashi flaunt with relief, Sasuke spent his time glaring at his opponent, Gaara, who seems to be doing the exact same thing back at him. After a few minutes of building tension and silence, Genma interrupted their staring contest by calling out: "Gaara of the Sand, come on down."

By the time Gaara had reached the stairs, Shikamaru had already dragged his lazy bum all the way up to the participant's waiting area and was currently lounging around, knowing that he no longer had any matches after this. He did, however, meet the two Grass Nins who seemed to be waiting for Gaara within the corridor halls. =Idiots. Do they really think Gaara would be the type to lose on purpose...= He concluded as he kept one eye open and one eye closed, pretending to be not interested in Sasuke's upcoming match while simultaneously trying to ignore Sakura's enthusiastic shouts. Sakura, on the other hand, was completely focussed on cheering at the top of her voice for Sasuke to notice Shikamaru's discomfort.

All the while, Naruto had stood stiffly watching the progression of the match with a seemingly calm façade, but inside, he was in turmoil over himself. =Can I truly just sit back and watch? Can I stand it once more if my friends were hurt right in front of me and I can't do anything to help? Can I be that heartless?= A tiny voice within his heart called out to him with a simple answer: 'No, I can't...'

"Alright. Uchiha Sasuke Versus Gaara! Match Begin!" Genma announced loudly at the start of the match, and without delay both combatants moved into their appropriate stances – Gaara had

released his sand from the huge gourd strapped onto his back while Sasuke had quickly retreated back to a safer distance.

Before the match could continue however, Gaara seemed to have developed an intense headache as he clutch at his forehead in pain. He murmured to himself: "Don't get so angry, mother... The blood I fed you before was bad... but don't worry... this time, it'll be delicious... I promise." He flinched in pain again and abruptly returned to his seemingly cold façade of before, as if he held two different personalities within him. Looking at Sasuke with ice-cold eyes, Gaara all but grunted: "come."

Sasuke instantly threw three normal shurikens at Gaara, which was automatically stopped by Gaara's Suna no Tate (Shield of Sand). Unexpectedly, the sand that had grabbed onto all three shurikens hardened and shaped itself to form a Suna Bunshin (Sand Clone) of Gaara himself. Watching impassively as Sasuke started running towards him, Gaara simply closed his eyes and mentally ordered his clone to attack. The clone lifted its chest and from it released a huge barrage of sand, heading straight towards Sasuke. Sasuke jumped upwards to dodge the attack as the sand crushed the area in which he had occupied only milliseconds before hand.

Narrowing his eyes, Sasuke threw another Kunai at the Suna Bunshin (Sand Clone) while still up in the air. Unlike the previous shurikens however, this was a power-enhanced kunai using Sasuke's own Chakra. Sasuke secretly smirked as he watched Gaara ignore the threat of his weapon.

The Suna Bunshin (Sand Clone) tried to deflect the kunai with the three shurikens still held within its hand, to no avail. Other than that, it simply stood guard over Gaara and remained where it was, thinking that it could withstand the Kunai's attack. However, when the power-enhanced kunai finally made impact with the compacted sand itself, the Suna Bunshin suddenly exploded into mass sand particles, and the kunai was free to continue its course towards Gaara.

Shocked at the apparent power of the kunai, Gaara shifted to his right quickly, just enough to avoid the Kunai's direct path of destruction but not fast enough to avoid all damage. Gaara flinched slightly as the kunai managed to scrape across his cheek, leaving quite a large size gash on his left cheek, though still protected by his hidden armour of sand. The kunai, having missed its original target, landed somewhere behind Gaara with a small explosion, leaving a one-metre crater behind, demonstrating the apparent power behind it.

Narrowing his eyes in anger at having been slightly hurt, Gaara gave a vicious, insane grin at Sasuke. Sasuke on the other hand, landed lightly onto his feet, still with a smirk on his face, before he rushed towards Gaara at full speed again.

Even though the Sand Bunshin had dissipated into sand particles, the sand particles itself, still performed the automatic function of trying to protect Gaara no matter what the situation, and so they immediately formed a wall of sand between Sasuke and Gaara. Sasuke's smirk widened as he quickly paused before his punch touches the sand wall. In a blink of an eye, Sasuke had twisted his ankle in one move and slid himself behind Gaara in one smooth, seemingly effortless motion.

Gaara's eyes widened slightly at the implied speed of Sasuke's movement. =Fast! It's just like him!= His thoughts on the comparison between Sasuke and Lee's moves were interrupted when Sasuke's punch finally made contact with Gaara's sand covered face. Even though the dense sand upon Gaara's skin took the blunt of the force from Sasuke's punch, but Gaara himself, was still flung sideways several metres before he finally fell onto his shield of sand that had surrounded him, protecting him from hitting the hard ground.

Standing up roughly, Gaara's cold eyes glared at Sasuke with no hint of compassion or mercy, his face visibly showing some cracks from the punch as well as the previous slash across the left cheek from the kunai earlier. A firm smirk continued to stay on Sasuke's own face. "So... That's the famous Suna no Yoroï (armour of sand), eh?"

He asked casually, as if the implication meant little to him. "I'll tear that armour apart!" He promised himself.

Running at speeds equal to Lee's, Sasuke dodged and avoided Gaara's Suna no Tate (shield of sand) easily as he made his way through the floating sand particles before twisting in front of Gaara's real body and punching him once again. This time, however, the punch was executed with the combined effects of the Raikan Mahi no Jutsu (Lightning shock paralysis) as he had performed the seals while he was still running.

Even though Gaara's shield of sand had caught Gaara from hitting the ground once again, but Gaara himself had already suffered the effects of the electrocution from the special jutsu. Gaara felt his body spasm slightly due to the electrical surge that had coursed through his veins. Whilst the sand on his skin did not conduct electricity, and had played a vital role at lessening the power of the attack, but still, some of the electrical currents managed to make it to his skin and from there, to the rest of his body.

=Damn. My body won't respond.= Gaara thought to himself calmly as his body continued to shake off the effects of the technique. Although physically hurt, Gaara nonetheless had enough control over himself to suppress the roaring call for blood and death from consuming him, a call originating from the demon within, Shukaku. All the same, the action was getting harder and harder for him to manage, as the more he suffers from Sasuke's assaults, the less he restrain the demon's desire.

Knowing Gaara was currently paralysed and unable to move, Sasuke pressed forward with his advantage. Dodging Gaara's Suna no Tate again and again, Sasuke continued to strike at Gaara's body with his fists and kicks, managing to convert several blows with his hands to implement a few more lightning shocks with his Raikan Mahi no Jutsu (Lightning Shock Paralysis).

After a few minutes of the same Taijutsu assaults from Sasuke, Gaara's Suna no Yoroi (Armour of Sand) seems to be cracking and

breaking apart piece by piece. Sasuke silently crowed with victory as he gave Gaara a round house kick in the face before flipping backwards several metres and performing the Gokakyuu no Jutsu (Powerful Fireball Technique) to try and finish Gaara off. Unfortunately for him, Gaara's Suna no Tate (Shield of Sand) not only saved him from hitting the ground, it also kept Gaara safe by blocking Sasuke's fire attack.

Releasing a deep breath, Gaara gathered his hands together to make an actual seal. He had, long ago, given in to the demon's bloodlust and wants nothing more than to tear Sasuke apart, bit-by-bit, and then let the boy rot in the heat until the birds decided to feed on his carcass to ensure his complete death. Releasing a large amount of Chakra, Gaara re-healed his armour of sand as well as called upon all of his remaining sand particles to surround him, condensing itself to form a special, protective Sand Sphere in which he may stay safe inside to perform one of his ultimate jutsus.

Sasuke rushed towards Gaara and crushed his Chakra-enhanced fist onto the Sand Sphere's surface, only to find that his fist didn't even make a dent in the sphere. Not only that, Sasuke realised that the sand particles used to create this Sand Sphere followed an automatic command to attack anything that comes near it. It had formed spikes on its own, directed at Sasuke when he approached and had, in some cases, pierced Sasuke's own skin on his arms and face.

Jumping back, Sasuke activated his Sharingan and tried to see what Gaara's up to. =He's using all that sand to protect himself now? What is he doing, shielding himself like that?= He wondered as even his eyes couldn't tell him what Gaara was planning to do inside of his protective Sand Sphere. "Absolute defence, huh?" Sasuke murmured to himself, narrowing his eyes in concentration.

While Gaara slowly reiterated a long list of seals as he performed them one by one, all within the confines of his absolute defence, a special third eye (made out of sand) was formed outside of his sphere, just to keep an eye on those around him.

Sasuke experimented by using a few techniques on the Sand Sphere, testing out whether it could be penetrated, all to no avail. Both the Raikan Mahi no Jutsu (Lightning Shock Paralysis) and the Gokakyuu no Jutsu (Powerful Fireball Technique) had no effect on the Sphere. Even the Chakra-enhanced kunais (power wise) didn't leave a single dent in Gaara's absolute defence. Trying to get close via his speed and Taijutsu moves only led Sasuke to dodge all the defensive spikes that forms whenever he gets close to the ball of sand. Overall, he had not been very successful in his endeavour, but then again, Sasuke hadn't expected that he would get through a defence like that so easily. "I guess this is the perfect time to use it." Sasuke muttered to himself in a low voice, a smirk slowly but surely formed on his face.

Performing several large back flips, Sasuke eventually attached himself half way up the stadium's wall opposite Gaara's Sand Sphere. There he squatted and readied himself for his most powerful attack yet. Completing a few seals, Sasuke held his right hand outstretched in front of him and waiting to execute the move by summoning up enough Chakra to keep the technique alive.

Soon, a small 'chi chi chi' sound started being emitted, accompanying the built up of Chakra being released by Sasuke onto his right hand. A few more moments later and Sasuke had a sparkling, sizzling, electrifying hand and arm, all charged with the physical form of Chakra in itself. The 'chi chi chi' sounds had also continually become louder with time accompanying the jutsu's development, until finally, the entire stadium rang with the same resonance, as if a thousands birds are present at the exact place at the exact time.

=CHIDORI!!!!= This thought raced through both Sakura and Naruto's mind as they watched Sasuke perform the same jutsu that they had only seen once in their entire lives, created by none other than the copy-ninja Kakashi - his first and only original jutsu.

Once the Chidori was completely formed and stable, Sasuke charged down the stadium wall like a bullet. As he raced down, he created a long ditch on the wall caused by the electrifying power of the Chidori, stretching all the way from where he had once positioned himself down to the very end of the wall, reaching the ground. Sasuke jumped off the wall, slamming on the rough grass but kept on running none stop, racing towards where Gaara was situated. All the while, the chirping sounds of a thousand birds followed in Sasuke's wake.

With his speed, it wasn't long before Sasuke finally reached Gaara's whereabouts. He dodged the spikes easily while getting closer and closer to his target. Finally, Sasuke smashed his Chidori charged right hand straight at Gaara's protective Sand Sphere, piercing right through the defence and directly injuring Gaara, all done within an instance of time.

Feeling the flesh of Gaara's muscle as well as the dribbling of wet blood, Sasuke smirked. He was sure he had at least done some real damage to Gaara. Now, all he had to do was to break the Sand barrier, continue to attack Gaara with Taijutsu and then somehow knock him out. However, Sasuke's plan was never fully implemented, since that was the exact moment that Gaara chose to start screaming about blood, as if this was the first time he had seen his own blood.

Slightly shocked at Gaara's unstable state, Sasuke was pulled out of his musings when he felt his right arm being crushed by a giant weight within the Sand Sphere. Gritting his teeth in pain, Sasuke decided to retreat and see with his Sharingan what the hell was going on inside the Sphere. Easier said than done. He pulled and pulled but whatever was inside the Sphere refused to release his arm, and now, his arm felt like it was being ripped apart by the brutal and vicious grip. Charging up his trapped arm with another burst of Chakra for an unformed Chidori, the 'thing' inside Gaara's Sand Sphere finally let up and Sasuke was able to pull his right arm out of the sphere.

When he finally opened his eyes to see what he had pulled out of the sphere along with his arm, Sasuke wasn't sure what the hell he was seeing. Gripping his injured right arm firmly, Sasuke watched in slight horror and awe at the 'thing' that moved so effortlessly like a swirling octopus leg, flipping through the air, landing on the ground with a hard thud and finally sliding all the way back through the little hole in the Sand Sphere (which Sasuke had created using his Chidori) like a snake.

The 'thing' was brown in colour, had strange black lines that crisscrossed itself, and had its ends highlighted in a darker shade than the rest. It seemed to be made up of sand but it had a gracefulness that belied its living consciousness, as if it was an animal formed out of sand or sand that had a living spirit within.

After the thing slithered back into the confines of the sphere, Sasuke's Sharingan enhanced eyes never left the hole upon the Sand Sphere's surface. His body didn't move an inch even while sweat ran down his brow; he was completely stunned by what he was seeing inside. There was a waving and swirling entity inside Gaara's Sand Sphere - that was the only way for him to describe it. What ever it was, it churned around and around in impatience, until finally, its 'eye' could be seen. Its eye – a large brown iris with a strange cross-shaped pupil, surrounding by black, stared back at Sasuke in curiosity. A loud, screaming, inhuman sound reverberates through out the stadium, silencing all other noise. No matter what it was, it most definitely wasn't human.

Suddenly, the sphere cracks. And then, more cracks appeared on the sand's surface, until finally, the entire sand sphere structure itself dissipates into sand particles. The sand rained down onto the ground, revealing behind it a slightly shaking and heaving Gaara, who was currently clutching his bleeding left shoulder in pain.

=It's different... That wasn't the 'eye' I saw... What the hell did I just see?! The 'thing' that was looking at me before! What the hell was it?!= Sasuke frantically thought to himself as he studied Gaara's gasping form in slight fear.

Unbeknownst to Sasuke, who was currently too preoccupied with figuring what he had just seen inside Gaara's sphere, Kabuto, now hidden behind his Anbu disguise started giving the signal to the rest of hidden Sound and Sand Shinobis on their side to act out the plan.

Placing his hand in a familiar seal, Kabuto concentrated on evoking the Genjutsu known as Nemurihane (Feathery Sleep). Once the seal was completed, thousands upon thousands of fluffy white feathers seem to appear suddenly out of no where, floating effortlessly through the air, making many people within the audience to fall asleep.

Noticing the majority of people suddenly falling asleep in the crowd stand surrounding them, Kakashi and Gai quickly performed a 'Genjutsu Deflection' to keep themselves from falling into the same Genjutsu trap. There were also a surprisingly large number of visible Konoha Shinobi (those wearing uniform) as well as undercover Konoha Shinobi hiding within the crowd that deflected the Genjutsu.

The warning that had been given to the Hokage almost four weeks ago had been heeded with careful preparation. The third Hokage, though old, was still very wily. He had deciphered from the Lady Oracle's speech pattern that the invasion would probably happen during the Chuunin Exam itself (1). And so he had requested that a large number of high ranked Chuunins or Jounins to hide themselves among the crowd within the stadium as well as studiously increasing the number of people guarding the Konoha protective walls and gates. At the same time when the signal of the invasion start, there will also be someone outside the gates to give a signal to all other Leaf Shinobis in the area to evacuate the civilians into safe havens. For example, Iruka had already started herding the children away from school and into the hidden bunkers within the four crafted Hokage head mountains.

Up in the crowd stands, many of the other Genin rookies had already fallen for the Genjutsu trap – Ino, Choji, Lee, Hinata (2), and Kiba lay haphazardly where they sat or fell when the incident occurred.

All of the current participants of the Chuunin Exam itself - Naruto, Sakura, Shino, Temari, Kankuro and even Shikamaru - had also deflected the Genjutsu heading their way. While Shikamaru pretended to fall asleep due to the Genjutsu, Sakura and Shino looked around in slight confusion as to what was going on and Naruto narrowed his eyes and tried to firm his conviction not to get involved.

Temari, Kankuro and their sensei, Baki, who was sitting with the crowd all tensed, knowing what was to come next.

Up in the VIP area, Kazekage gazed at the third Hokage with wide, pleased eyes and a nasty expression hidden under his cloak, while the Hokage gazed back with a stern, almost accusing look on his face. Both seem to have forgotten about the Lady Oracle sitting on the far left side of the group. After all, it is a well known fact that Hidden Air Nins refuse to participate in any outside conflicts unless it directly involves them. "It has begun..." The Kazekage murmured. Narrowing his eyes in anticipation, he asked the Hokage: "Shall we?"

Instantly, the two guards behind the Kazekage jumped into action, throwing a smoke bomb to obscure the Leaf Nin's visibility as to what was happening as well as giving a loud explosion, signalling to all their surrounding forces that the Invasion had finally begun.

All the Konoha Shinobis looked on at the VIP area in shock as the explosion from the smoke bomb reverberated around the now mostly sleeping crowd within the stadium.

Outside the gates of Konoha, large numbers of Sound Nins leaped into action, rushing towards the wall, all preparing to attack the supposedly unsuspecting Leaf Nins. Behind them, the accompanying Sand Nins have just begun summoning their giant three-headed rattlesnake.

Once the snakes were summoned, they would be the first line of offence, smashing their way through the fragile walls erected around Konoha. Once through, then the time of fun would begin. Both the Sand and the Sound Shinobis have been orders to slaughter every single man, woman and child that they see, burn all the houses and do as much damage as they possibly can to Konoha. To the Sound, it would be a sign of their victory and power. For the Sand, it would be an act of revenge upon Konoha, who had made them suffer for so long with its prosperous ways.

Within the stadium, all the Anbu personnel (within a close proximity) immediately rushed towards the area of the VIP stand. Their first priority would be to ensure the Hokage's safety before all else.

Kakashi and Gai had also started heading towards the Hokage's location but were told by the Anbu that they would handle it, and so, both Kakashi and Gai decided to stay behind to watch over their students as well as the other civilians.

Finally reaching the rooftops of the Stadium's main building, the leader of the Anbu squad (wearing white as opposed to the others all wearing black) started ordering his squadron into their appropriate actions. "Li team above! Ro team below! Protect the Daimyos, other ministers and important businessman." The Anbu quickly complied.

Looking back at the VIP platform, the Anbu Squad leader was slightly surprised that Kazekage's two guards had jumped straight out, heading towards the Anbu guards to fight. Infuriated at the Sand Nin's betrayal, the Anbu leader quickly disposed of the traitors by slicing them apart into neat a sets of four, cutting each person in half. "GET OUT OF MY WAY!" He yelled, frustrated that he had been

delayed by these ninjas in performing his duty of protecting the Hokage.

The other Anbu Shinobis also launched themselves straight towards the VIP stand itself, hoping that they weren't too late in saving the Hokage. However, a sudden sound of someone screaming in pain brought themselves to a halt just before they reach inside.

Inside the VIP platform, concealed by smoke, three kunais flung towards a Leaf Nin pierced deeply into his chest as he screamed out in pain. The third Hokage looked out at the poor man with sympathy in his eyes. "Hokage-sama... please... escape..." was all the man could gurgle out before he collapsed in death. However, before the Hokage even move, the Kazekage had already appeared behind him and held a kunai to his neck.

Jumping through the cloud of smoke (created by the previous smoke bomb), the Kazekage (with the Hokage as his hostage) landed on top of the highest rooftop of the Stadium's main building. Moreover, before the confused Anbu could distinguish what was going on, the four pieces of supposedly dead body parts belonging to the two Sand protectors of Kazekage himself, undid the Henge no jutsu (transformation) they had been using and flew into action. Landing on the four corners of the giant rooftop, the Sound Four of the Hidden Sound Village, special guards to Orochimaru himself, revealed themselves to the world.

"Finally, it's my turn to play." The dark skinned Sound Shinobi with six arms stated cheerfully in a languid pose.

"That was boring... doing Henge for such a long time." Muttered another Shinobi with two heads.

"You guys stink like sweat." Scolded the only female of the group, one with red hair.

"Stop it. You guys are teammates right?" The last one of the Sound Four, a bulky man with a strange hair cut interrupted the other's

complaints.

Smoke finally clearing; the Anbu could clearly see what had been done to their comrade (Raido) who was given the task of protecting the Hokage. Enraged at having one of their own killed, the Anbu started heading towards the Kazekage and the Hokage, only to be stopped by the four Sound Shinobis as they prepared their ultimate barrier jutsu: "Ninpou: Shishi Enjin! (Ninjutsu: Four Point Purple Fire Shield!)" Instantly, the four Sound Nins erected a large rectangular barrier with its walls all becoming a dark purple shade, infused with abnormal flames.

One of the Anbu who tried to force his way through the barrier found his body suddenly burnt by unnatural flames, quickly killing him in the process. The other Anbu's hesitated in following the first's example and had no other choice but to stand outside the barrier and wait for it to dissipate.

There were nine traitors, Kabuto included, that had sided with the Sound and Sand's invasion of Leaf. All of whom stood proudly, undisguised, in front of Kakashi, Gai and several other Konoha Shinobis, creating a battle arena of their own within the crowd stands where the majority of people are still under Kabuto's spell.

Inside the Stadium's official battle arena, Sasuke was beyond just confused as to what was happening. First, his battle with Gaara had been interrupted with that strange Genjutsu that coated almost the entire stadium. Then Temari, Kankuro and their Sensei had jumped in, seemingly standing guard over Gaara. And only an instant later, he found himself being safeguarded by none other than the examiner, Genma. =What the hell is going on?!= The confused boy thought to himself.

"So... it seems the Sand has betrayed us as well. I would have never thought you'd stoop so low as to help that snake invade your allies."

Genma murmured deeply, in a low tone of voice, deceptively suppressing his anger at the situation at hand.

"Heh... The Sand are Proud Shinobis, we refuse to be subjected to a slow death by Konoha. Victory will be ours and then, we will prove to the world which village is truly more powerful." Baki sneered back, his anger not as greatly disguised as Genma's, but his tone of voice did infer a slight tension, and his eyes kept roaming back to the redheaded Shinobi under his command.

Gaara was groaning and grunting in pain as he clutched at his forehead tightly, flinching away from any attempt at contact by his siblings. Blood veins were visibly throbbing on his temple, seemingly giving him a headache worth more pain than any other could have imagined. Both Kankuro and Temari just stood beside him, unable and too scared to help him in any way.

"He's experiencing the side effects already! It's impossible to proceed now!!" Temari called out as she tried her best to calm her younger brother, and yet knowing that if Gaara even 'looked' at her wrongly, she was prepared to escape with her life intact at any cost.

"What are we suppose to do now?! Are we going to proceed with the plan without Gaara?!" A panicked Kankuro asked Baki with an undertone of desperation. The entire plan (for them at least) had been shot to hell, and personally, he would have preferred to just leave with their lives instead of risking it here and now.

Watching the shaking form of his most formidable student kneeling on the ground like a lost child in pain, Baki gritted his teeth tightly and made his decision as to the future of this fight. =Damn it! Gaara! You forgot the plan completely!! You selfish idiot!= Sweating slightly at the implications of his decision, Baki mentally nodded to himself that he would take full responsibility once he returns to the Sand... If he returns to the Sand... Whether they succeed in their invasion or not, he refuse to back down. "Temari! Kankuro! Abort the mission, take Gaara and run!" His voice was calm but his heart was all but racing.

"WHAT?" A shocked Temari could not stop but call out.

"What about you?" Kankuro, also surprised beyond belief, looked at his Sensei for guidance. It was difficult for them to reconcile the image of their always mission-oriented Sensei with this man who had just ordered them to abandon their mission. They have both been taught from an early age that the Sand Shinobis are proud Shinobis, 'we can die... but we cannot fail' (3). That was the motto of the Sand. To purposely desert their mission and retreat was the coward's way out, and will lead to a fate worse than death, especially in the eyes of the Sand.

"I'll be joining the battle. Go!" Baki ordered with a slight undertone of regret in his voice, as if resigning himself to the fate of his decision.

Kankuro and Temari looked at one another for a second before nodding to themselves, grabbing firmly onto Gaara and leaving the stadium as fast as their ninja skills could take them. They never looked back at their sensei, nor did they give any words of encouragement. This was the way of the Sand Shinobi.

Watching the three Sand Genins disappear over the wall of the stadium, Sasuke looked at Genma's back in slight frustration. "HEY!" he called. "What the hell is going on here?!" Sasuke demanded to know, with a tinge of desperate understanding in his voice.

"Sorry... But the Chuunin Selection Exam is over. You should go pursue the enemy, set off after Gaara and the rest of his team." Genma noted in an authoritative tone of voice. Noticing that Sasuke still hadn't left yet after his order, Genma mentally sighed to himself. "If you're a leaf Shinobi then make yourself useful! Your village is currently under attack! What are you waiting for?! An invitation?!" He snapped, irritated that the boy hadn't done as he was told to the first time he spoke.

Still not understanding exactly what was happening, but Sasuke now knew what he must do. Nodding to himself in determination, Sasuke immediately ran after the Sand siblings, jumping over the stadium

with ease and hoping he could finally finish his interrupted fight with Gaara.

Watching Sasuke run after Gaara and the other Sand Genin, Naruto felt his heart lurch out of his rib cage. =NO! Sasuke! Get back here! There's no way for you to win against Shukaku! Don't go after him! SASUKE!!!= Naruto dented the steel bars underneath his hands as he took his frustrations out on the inanimate object.

Next to him, Sakura was almost reaching panic mode. "Naruto! Where is Sasuke going!? What the hell is going on?! Who are those Shinobis!? NARUTO! Answer me, damn it!" Sakura yelled at him, a strong hint of desperation and confusion in her voice.

Shutting his eyes tightly in shame, Naruto quickly explained the situation. "It's Orochimaru. He and the Sand are invading the Leaf. Sasuke is going after Gaara..." His voice drifted into silence, unable to finish his sentence by saying that Sasuke would probably die if he faced the awakened Shukaku by himself. Sakura's eyes were wide with shock, looking at Naruto as if he had suddenly grown two extra heads.

Mentally shifting due to the intent gaze of his teammate, Naruto decided to motivate her into helping with the fights, since he himself, could not involve himself. "Sakura. Ino, Choji, Hinata, Kiba and many civilians are up in the audience stands. They're all probably asleep due to the Genjutsu technique Feathery Sleep, and are helpless in defending themselves currently. Please go save them..."

Sakura blinked out of her stupor and immediately ran towards the stairs to get to her best friend (even if they have become rivals). =Now's my chance to prove myself. I can't fail in saving my friends. I just can't!= Suddenly realising that Naruto wasn't following her, she turned back and looked at Naruto accusingly. "Aren't you coming, Naruto? Or are you going to go after Sasuke?" Sakura retorted, impatient to leave and help.

Naruto looked away from his friend's direct gaze, tilting his head downward in shame and self-misery. "I can't." He whispered, almost too softly that Sakura couldn't hear, but she did catch the words. "I'm representing the Air now, I can't involve myself... Gomen ne, Sakura... I just can't..." Lowering his head even more, Naruto's hair covered his eyes and almost half of his face, trying to hide himself from the cruel world.

Sakura's shocked expression slowly turned to anger and rage. She gritted her teeth and glared at Naruto, the expression on her face filled with hurt, betrayal and anger. "Fine. I'll save them myself!" She screamed at him and ran up the stairs again, without a backward glance at her ex-teammate. While running, Sakura didn't notice that a few drops of tears had drifted from her eyes. =Why? Naruto? Why?= She quickly pushed her emotions aside and decided to take them out on the enemy Shinobis instead.

Back in the participant's seating area, Naruto gave a heavy sigh, before turning around and looking at the figure of a collapsed boy on the ground. "Aren't you going after Sakura to help Ino and Choji, Shikamaru? You're not fooling anyone by pretending to sleep. Even Sakura and Shino had noticed, which was why they left you alone." Naruto inquired, in a tired and depressed voice.

Shikamaru answered by snapping his eyes wide opened and slowly pulled himself to his feet. Finally on his feet but still in a lazy posture, he looked at Naruto with a penetrating expression. "I was just waiting to see what you would do, Naruto. And frankly, you disappoint me."

Naruto flinched at the comment, knowing that he deserved every bit of insult from the normally laid back boy.

Shifting his gaze up to the audience's platform, Shikamaru asked in a drawling tone of voice: "You sure she's gonna be okay up there by herself? Shino's already gone after Sasuke once he saw him leap out of the stadium, and me, I'm just here because I know I'd be more of a hindrance than of any real help if I go up there. I don't have

enough Chakra and my techniques are mostly defensive..." He trailed off as he looked back at Naruto.

Naruto gave him a very determined look. "Sakura is stronger than anybody gives her credit for. In fact, she is already up to Chuunin level but because she has never really been tested against someone, she doesn't realise how much she has grown in the past months. To tell you the truth, Shikamaru, she could probably give you a run for your money. Sakura can take care of herself, more so than any other Leaf Genin I know of." Naruto concluded in a very firm and confident voice.

"But can she kill?" Shikamaru retorted suddenly, with a very focussed and serious look in his eyes, directly challenging Naruto.

Naruto looked straight back without flinching. "If she has to, she will. I believe in her." Naruto confirmed. Shrugging his shoulders slightly in retreat, however, he followed up with another statement. "And anyway, she has the Kyosei Suimin no Jutsu (Forced Sleep Technique) which no one can counter, so she doesn't have to kill them, just a light tap on the shoulder and a quick slice of the kunai will be all she needs."

Sighing in irritation, Shikamaru tried another approach. "Can you really sit back and watch as your friends fight to the death? Are they even your 'friends' any more?" He asked forcefully, trying to make Naruto realise what a big mistake he was making by standing out of the battle. By his calculations, Shikamaru understood that even if he joined the fights, there would be little difference to the outcome anyway. However, if 'Naruto' joined the fight on Konoha's side, then there's a big chance that the Leaf will overcome the Sound and the Sand. So, instead of jumping into combat half cocked like most other Shinobis in his position, Shikamaru chose the more effective way of winning by manipulating someone more powerful than him to fight in his place. After all, Naruto was a great asset that should not be locked away.

Naruto frowned in concentration. He knew exactly what Shikamaru was trying to do but inside his heart, he couldn't help but agree with Shikamaru. After all, from what he had seen, Shikamaru was a certified genius and would know of the best solutions to every occasion. But still, if he did involve himself in the upcoming battles, then he would be directly going against his Aunt's wishes and who knew what she would pull out of her sleeve to punish him for this act. It wasn't the future punishments that really worried Naruto; it was just that... he's terrified of seeing his Aunt's disappointed face. He doesn't want to be abandoned again, and this time, by his only family member. Just like the time spent in the Hidden Air village, Naruto was willing to do anything to make his aunt proud of him, even if it meant sacrificing himself and his needs. =However, is her acceptance worth my friend's lives?= He thought to himself in dismay.

Beside the blonde boy, Shikamaru stood patiently, waiting for Naruto to come to his own conclusions.

Within the audience viewing platforms, Gai and Kakashi were very busy dispatching Sound Shinobi after Sound Shinobi, but they were both surprised when Sakura suddenly joined their group by quickly rendering a few of the Sound Ninjas into deep slumbers before they could hurt any of the sleeping civilians.

"Where's Naruto?" Kakashi asked as he thrust his kunai deeply into the chest of another Sound Ninja.

"That bastard isn't even fighting! He gave off some crap about being an Air Nin and can't involve himself! That COWARD!" Sakura yelled at the top of her voice, completely disregarding the fact that she had literally released the dreaded 'Inner Sakura' out of her body, joining the two completely different minds into one focused purpose of protecting their friends and hurting the enemy. Kakashi sweat dropped as he watched his student punch the lights out of another Sound Shinobi, almost feeling sorry for the Sound Nin. =Damn! But

when Sakura gets angry... She becomes scary!= He thought to himself.

Blinking out of his daze, Kakashi re-focused on killing as many Sound Nins as he can. But while he continued to fight, his mind wandered over Sakura's earlier statements. =Sasuke's gone after Gaara. After seeing that strange sand thing, I'm beginning to get worried about him. And Naruto just happened to pick TODAY as the day he represents the Air. Damn the Air and their unbending rules about 'inherent neutrality!' Naruto is a Leaf Shinobi! He has a responsibility to fight for the leaf just as he has a responsibility as an Air Nin!= Kakashi mentally debated with himself but never slowed in his movements. =Maybe I should end this fight quickly and go after Sasuke myself...= Looking over at Sakura again, he was very surprised at how versatile Sakura had become. =She's really grown... Looks like she really is prepared to become a Chuunin... However, strength wise, she is still nowhere near Sasuke's capacity and definitely won't be of much help if I sent her after him and Gaara. Damn! I really need Naruto for this mission!=

While Kakashi continued to ponder and fight at the same time, Naruto was finally coming to a conclusion of his own. =I can't... I don't want to spend the rest of my life regretting my actions, like what happened with Ellie... I won't be able to live with myself.= Naruto concluded mentally. =I need to live my life according to my own emotions and decision... That... should be my new Nindo (way of the Ninja)! I should not take back my words and I should never bow down to other's demands!=

With a heavy sigh, a short nod to Shikamaru, Naruto performed a set of seals, which he hardly ever used - the teleportation jutsu. It wasn't exactly a difficult jutsu to perform; it's just that it is very difficult for the user to pinpoint exactly 'where' they want to end up. Shikamaru has the same problem with the Kage Michi (Way of the Shadows). It's easy to perform the seal itself as long as you have an affiliation with shadow manipulation, however, to know exactly 'where' you're going

to end up, that's a whole different ball game. Naruto can only teleport himself to a certain area when he knows exactly 'who' he wants to teleport towards and 'where' that certain someone is. Shikamaru doesn't need that knowledge for he has found a little short cut – using his kunais and special notes to let him control exactly where he end up and he can use the same kunai in any offensive move he pleases.

After completing the seal, Naruto blinked out of existence and reappeared in front of his aunt and Kaga-san without any problems. Gulping under the intense scrutiny of his Aunt and her raised eyebrow as if asking 'what are you doing here?', Naruto licked his lips in preparation for defying his Aunt's orders.

Kneeling down on one of his knees, Naruto lowered his head in both respect and as a sign of pleading. "Forgive me, Lady Oracle, for I am unable to abide by the ancient rule of 'inherent neutrality' that is followed by all Air Nins. I may be an Uzumaki, but I am also the son of the Fourth Hokage of Konoha and as such, I have a duty to fulfil here. I must protect this village, the same that my father died to safe guard. I will accept any punishment for my disobedience of the ancient rules later, just please... I beg of you... Let me fight!" Naruto stood stiffly, awaiting his Aunt's answer while shifting slightly in nervousness.

Finally, after a long drawn out silence between the three figures, Ruri closed her eyes and sighed in resignation. However, when she finally opened her eyes again, she looked on at Naruto with a very gentle smile and soft expression on her face. Naruto slowly lifted his head to gaze back at his Aunt uncertainly, but seeing the smile and the openly tender face, he relaxed his tense shoulders knowing that she would at least give in to his demands.

"Is this your final decision, Naruto?" The Lady Oracle asked in a gentle but firm voice.

Naruto only nodded back in answer.

Releasing another soft sigh, Ruri turned her attentions to Kaga, who was standing patiently behind her. Also giving him a short nod, Kaga immediately started performing three short seals in response. Naruto looked on in confusion as to what Kaga was doing. There really wasn't much that they could give him to help him in his fight against Gaara... Unless of course, it was a Tenkun no Buki, but then again, his Aunt Ruri was the only that can release the seal on his hand, not Kaga. So, in the end, Naruto just sat silently, waiting to see what Kaga was going to do.

Upon finishing the seals, dark shadows started appearing directly on the ground (in front of Naruto) without any need of a solid object to create it. The Shadow morphed itself into a flat square before starting to climb vertically up, stopping mid way up into the air; it once again flattened out sealing itself forming a black box. For a few more seconds, the shadow box darkened in colour until you couldn't see through it at all, before finally receding, fading into nothingness and revealing from within itself, were Naruto's two pet foxes – Kibi and Kirin, both yelping happily at being re-united with their master.

"Kibi and Kirin will help you on your quest. Now go. And remember to rely on a demon to defeat a demon, Naruto. You do not need to worry about things here." Ruri commanded in a firm voice and she watched calmly as Naruto quickly unsealed both Kibi and Kirin into their battle forms before jumping on top of Kirin's massive back and riding her off, literary flying after Sasuke. Just before leaving the immediate vicinity however, Naruto turned back to give his Aunt one final farewell look of gratitude and he whispered the word into the air (though Ruri and Kaga still heard it none the less): "Arigato, Aunt Ruri. Kaga-san."

Ruri stayed in her seat while Kaga stood silently behind her. Both watched Naruto manoeuvre Kirin until they were landing near Shikamaru once again. Both continued to gaze amusedly at how Naruto literary had to drag the lazy Shikamaru onto Kirin's back, the dark haired boy complaining all along the way. A final stop near

Kakashi and Sakura to tell them that they were heading after Sasuke, Naruto and Shikamaru finally raced off on their journey.

Once the two boys and two foxes were out of sight, Ruri gave out another sigh of relief. "It's about time."

Kaga nodded. "You were betting on him to defy your orders, weren't you, Ruri?" He asked.

"Of course. I knew that he would finally grow a backbone for himself and eventually go against my orders. It's good for him. He needs to grow up too, and not to always rely on my judgement. I'm glad that he has finally come out of his shell since leaving the Air. Don't you?" Ruri retorted nonchalantly, stretching her muscles in slight annoyance.

Kaga gave a short chuckle. "However, I do not think that he will ever get over his fear of you. It doesn't matter how much he grows, you know very well that there is a solid mountain right in the middle of his heart that he dedicates to you every day of his existence. I have never known of anyone who is so grateful for someone else. He's terrified of disappointing you. He always will be."

"Yeah." Ruri sighed in exasperation. "Sometimes, I wish Yuuki was still here. At least then, Naruto won't idolise me so much and be able to actually see me as a real person, not just a God-like figure to look up to and obey. He would have been happy at least..." Her voice drifted off as she remembered the past.

"No matter what the future holds in store for all of us, we must make our own decisions then and there and have faith in ourselves that we won't regret our actions. That is all we can ever do, even for you, Lady Oracle." Kaga philosophised in a lecturers' voice.

"Faith..." Ruri murmured after him, worried eyes roaming the blue horizon, as if hoping to catch a glimpse of her errant nephew and his foxes.

[End.]

(1) "I'm simply here to watch the show... and to warn you about your upcoming problems concerning Orochimaru... so I suggest that you start summoning all your Shinobis for an inter-room assembly to discuss the problem at hand." – Basically, the hidden meaning of this statement is that there will be a 'show' to watch, so Orochimaru will not attack BEFORE the Chuunin Selection Exam, which means that he will probably attack either during or after the exam itself. But she also hinted that the third Hokage should 'start summoning all his Shinobis', which means that when the invasion comes, it will be in large numbers.

(2) For those of you who are wondering: Kabuto did NOT go anywhere near Hinata, and she did NOT suffer any pain while she watched Naruto fight Neji - Haku had already warned her about her body and had given her some herbs to keep her body from reacting to stress. And YES, she did fall into the same Genjutsu trap as the others because 1) Her Byakugan wasn't used and 2) she was still too weak and with limited Chakra to activate it.

(3) There is no such motto. I just made it up. Sounds cool though, huh? Anyway, this little snippet was inspired by the Cantonese movie – Bodyguard from Beijing . It was almost a direct translation of the line – "We can die, but we cannot fail!"

For those of you who still think Sakura isn't up to par with a Chuunin, well, let's just say she's around Iruka's and Mizuki's level... So she IS Chuunin material. She has the mental capability to analyse as Chuunin's do, and she can memories everything the first time she sees it (sort of a photographic memory so to say), so her only down point would still be her physical ability. Talented in Genjutsu, quite high in Taijutsu (due to Lee's harsh training) but still minimal at Ninjutsu, I think my Sakura can kick the original Sakura's ass at least three times over! What do you think?! XD

Just in case anybody asks, Kibi is also standing on top of Kirin's massive head (since he's much smaller). Kibi is also taking over the role of Pakkun in the manga and anime, because it's sense of smell is also incredibly strong.

Anyway, hope you guys liked this chapter as well. Since I've made the quickest three chapter consecutive updates in my ENTIRE LIFE! I think I need to get a small break to work on my other fic, so don't be surprised if I don't update in a while. Well, anyway, please read and review! I love reviews!

Chapter 18

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Eighteen: Gaara Vs Naruto

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

Stonebridge, Ganymade, Crystal-Chan2, Toki Mirage, CrazyAce & Co, k, SilverMoonlight, Wolfgirl13, SaLLy11, FlareOfDragon, Anime Redneck, Dragon Noir, Insanechildfanfic, inu-chan613, Firehedgehog, chibified kitsunes, Sierra-Falls, Skuld's Sentaro, anonymous, RuByMoOn17, place-your-name-here, stoictimer, Daniel of Lorien, Kitty meow, The Shinobi, Gopu, wormkaizer, Shadow Eclipse, Inusaiyan, Dragon Sheinto, hyuugaman, hmr, Cruthces, Night-Owl123: Thank you all for your patience of which I am sadly to say I don't deserve, but finally, here it is, the next chapter! Please enjoy!

Kyubi-Angel: Yeah, I have a bad habit of drawing extra large heads.

Black Terran: Thanks for the praise. The story will be slowly deviate from the original plotline, but if you're looking for something dramatic and unpredictable, you'll be disappointed. I know it's started to get kinda 'canon' but there is a reason for that. Please be patient. Naruto is only ever 'beefed-up' when he uses the Tenkun no buki, even the match against Kakashi had not been as promising because he hadn't learn of the Tenshi no Doki. There will be more 'matched up' battles in the future, promise.

Hikariko: Wow! You're the only one who picked out on that. Yeah, there is something going on there but let's keep that secret to ourselves.

OpposingForce: I think I've already answered these questions on your story's review but can't seem to find it anywhere. o;; Um... It should be around the first volume of Downfall of the Light , after chapter 16, I think.

Hibiki54: The reply to reviews have nothing to do with the story, please ignore that if you don't like it, it's just there because I want it to be there. My characters will ALWAYS be ambiguous, even to me, so their interactions are always more difficult to depict and understand than first glance. The 'Talking' comes later, please read everything before you make any judgement.

Winged Knight: Thank you for your input on the Genin teams! They're gonna be sooo cool! Can't wait to write about it, but it'll still be a long time to come.

Clicke: Heh heh... A very long story... There are three arcs in the entire story, and this is the first arc.

Hitomi No Ryu: Arigato for all your help and the addition of 2 genin teams! I don't remember saying there is another set of special weapons... But if you want to give your genins any fancy weapons, that's fine, as long as they're not as strong as the Tenkun no buki. Thank you!

Insanity2: Yeah... I do reread the manga or review the anime episode just so that I stay true to the original story line. I don't like changing too much of the original creator's ideas. I always believed that if it's in there in the first place, it must be important. I just try to squash it into as compact a chapter as possible. Kakashi is lazy, no doubt about it. Heh heh... I like my Sakura, sooner or later, she should be able to control her moods. Actually, I HAD wanted Ruri and Kaga to get involved in the battle by introducing another Tenkun no buki, but when I started writing this chapter, I changed my mind... I don't even

know why my muse suddenly changed but it did, and here is the result. Unfortunately, other Hidden Air Nins won't be appearing until the second Arc but you can have a look at the new OCs placed in my Gallery's page.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. Wai! Finally, the LONG AWAITED FIGHT between Gaara and our beloved Naruto. You'll also get to see a glimpse of what Kaga-san is capable of! Sorry for the long wait but here it is. So Enjoy!

Another special note, this chapter is especially dedicated to Yume-chan, author of The Return of the Unforgettable , or Irreplaceable ; I wish you the best, Yume-chan!

means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

Flashback scenes

Chapter 18

The Lady Oracle sat firmly unmoving on her chair, undisturbed and not bothered by the chaos that reigned around her. She watched, impassively as Konoha Shinobis fought against Sound Shinobis in full out combat, trying desperately not to let any injuries come to the civilians as a result of their battles. Having already seen this battle multiple times in her visions, the Lady Oracle chose to stay in the sidelines, since she had already done what she came to do. However, there is one particular event that still stirs her temper.

Above her presence, on top of the very roof of the VIP stand, she could feel the impacts of both the attacks used by the third Hokage

and Orochimaru. Her grip on the armchair tightened slightly as she knew of what Orochimaru planned to do next, and it angered her.

Beside her, Kaga finally stirred into some semblance of action. "Lady, should I interfere?" He asked in a quiet voice.

Though still tense, the Lady Oracle finally nodded her head slightly in acceptance. Instantly, Kaga wrapped himself within a materialised shadow and disappeared from the scene, leaving only the Lady Oracle herself to sit tightly in her chair.

Within the special barrier that has been created by the Sound Four specifically to trap the Hokage of Konoha, the third had just finished a quick set of hand seals. "Shuriken Kage Bunshin no Jutsu! (Shuriken Shadow Replication Technique)" Suddenly, hundreds of Shurikens took the place of the single Shuriken that had been thrown in the foray by the Hokage, all of which were aimed at Orochimaru.

Orochimaru, still calm and complacent, quickly performed his own set of complicated seals as fast as he could. "Kinjutsu: Kuchiyose no Jutsu - Edo Tensei (Forbidden Technique: Summoning Technique – Impure World Resurrection)!" Orochimaru yelled as he slapped his hands together and summoned forth the right amount of Chakra to perform this technique. Immediately, a human size coffin with the character of 'one' across the front of it launched itself from the ground, for no apparent reason. As it came, Orochimaru called out almost cheerfully: "ONE!"

SHIT!! Using Summonings as a shield against my shurikens!? But these corpses belong to... Oh NO! The third Hokage thought to himself as he quickly tried to rectify the situation by performing another set of complicated seals, desperately hoping that he won't have to fight the third corpse if Orochimaru ever summoned 'him.'

"TWO!" Orochimaru called gleefully, as both coffins (the characters of 'one' and 'two' on each) now stood proudly in front of him, stopping the onslaught of shurikens. "And finally... THREE!" A third

coffin (with the character 'four' on it) suddenly appeared from a strange dimensional vortex at the roof surface and it slowly slit upwards.

NO! AM I TOO LATE!? The Hokage questioned himself as he watched in fear as the third coffin slowly rose from the summoned dimension.

Suddenly, to both combatants' surprise, Kaga reappeared, morphing through his materialised shadow as he jumped down firmly onto the surface of the third coffin, instantly halting its rise from continuing.

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS!? SHADOW MASTER!"

Orochimaru yelled, infuriated at having the Air Nin obstruct his plans, but at the same time, feeling slight fear wondering whether or not he would have to fight the Shadow Master.

"I refuse to let you dishonour the fourth Hokage of Konoha by summoning forth his corpse in such a manner. Though not official, he IS the husband of our Yuuki Hime and as such I will not let you disgrace our honoured princess and her mate. Not to mention... He is Naruto-sama's father, and as the sire to our Uzumaki heir... I would kill you in an instant if you dare touch his rested remains." Kaga stated plainly, though his emerald eyes glared coldly at Orochimaru, as if daring him to refute.

Orochimaru shifted nervously even while he gave the Shadow Master a glare of his own, before finally deciding that it would be better if he simply gives in to the request, and so, he abandoned his last summoning.

The third coffin (with the character 'four' on it) slowly slid back into the dimensional abyss it had been summoned from and soon disappeared from view. Kaga jumped off the vanishing coffin and landed lightly in front of Orochimaru. There he gave the snake another glare before turning around to look at the third Hokage, perhaps for the last time. "Goodbye, Sarutobi." Kaga whispered to the old man as he gazed at him with a very sympathetic and

respectful expression on his face. In response, the third Hokage returned with a determined nod of his own, knowing that this really was 'goodbye' as Kaga have said. It was a show of gratitude to the Air Nin's involvement and at the same time a pledge to farewell each other.

Kage then redirected his gaze somewhere else and activated his shadow teleportation. The Kage Heki (Shadow Barrier) was summoned forth voicelessly as it wrapped around Kaga's body in the shape of rectangular prism, then, Kaga used the Kageho (Shadow Walk) (1) to teleport out of the secured barrier created by the Sound Four, and reappeared again behind his mistress. There, he sighed in slight despondent, looking at his mistress's tense posture, he once again wished that the rules of the Kuunoki (Air) could be defied so easily. However, he wasn't about to take the chance of challenging the ancient rules set up by the Council Seven or else he runs the risk of having his mistress locked up for life, like many of her predecessors before her. (2)

"Is that all you wish of me, my Lady?" Kaga asked formally, knowing that his mistress is already under a lot of stress and doesn't need to be provoked anytime soon.

She sighed with hidden exhaustion. Unlike Naruto, she doesn't have that great a stamina and endurance; therefore, the last week of intensive training had worn her out more than she would like to admit. Not to mention, she had also been rather busy organising the sealing ritual that is to come after Naruto's confrontation with Shukaku, as well as preparing for the aftermath of this Sound Invasion. Sometimes, she wondered why she even cared, considering this isn't even her village, but then again, one look at her nephew would help her realise all her reasons. My sister died protecting this village... I won't let it burn to the ground... not while I still have a single breath in me! Ruri closed her eyes and bid forth all her memories of her sister, the one person other than Kaga that truly understood her, that would support her without asking for anything in

return. Yuuki... If only you could see Naruto now... You'd be proud of him, I'm sure...

After reminiscing about her lost sister, Ruri finally pulled herself together. She stood, tall, proud and undisturbed by the continuing chaos that surrounds her. "Come Kaga, we will return to the tower where the sealing awaits. We have much we still have to do before Naruto's return." She ordered in a very calm and complacent tone of voice.

Kaga bowed low to his mistress. "As you wish, my Lady." Once the formalities were over, he quickly summoned forth another Kage Heki (Shadow Barrier) to wrap around both his mistress and himself, before activating the Kageho (Shadow Walk) that took them away from the arena completely.

Goodbye. Hokage-sama. Forgive me for not doing more to protect your village... Naruto... Come back to me... These were the last thoughts that Ruri held just before she vanished from the stadium arena completely.

WHY! OH WHY AM I **ALWAYS** FORCED INTO DOING TROUBLESOME THINGGGGGSSSSSSSS!!!! Shikamaru frantically thought as he gripped onto Naruto's jacket with one arm and clutched tightly on to the long fur of Naruto's pet fox with his other. Eyes narrowed in irritation, Shikamaru asked himself once again why he even agreed to come along with Naruto. It's not like I'm gonna be much help!? If I wasn't going to be of much use to the others back at the arena, what the hell am I doing HERE of all places?! He mentally screamed at himself for ever letting the blonde boy drag him into the battle, it was just too much trouble. Suddenly, hearing Kibi's low growl of anger brought Shikamaru out of his mental berating.

"What's got into him?!" Shikamaru shouted with as much breath as he could take, considering they were flying at very fast speeds through the forest canopies, swerving this way and that to avoid the oncoming tree trunks, branches and leaves. If they had flew any

higher, they probably wouldn't be able to track the Sand Trios and Sasuke's tracks, but this way, at least Kibi could smell what had happened to the lot of them.

"Kibi smell pursuers after us. About 8 of them... no!" Listening to more of Kibi's growls, Naruto rectified himself. "2 squadrons totalling 8 Shinobis and one more trailing behind them, Sound Shinobis by the looks of it!" Naruto shouted back without turning around to look at the black haired boy.

Eyes narrowing further with a calculative glint, Shikamaru grunted out in irritation. "How the hell are they following us?" He paused for a few seconds pondering his own question before shaking off the thought to ask another question. "And what should we do now?"

"You're the brains, think of something!" Naruto grunted back, completely focussed on hanging on for dear life as he silently urged Kirin to pick up some more speed, either to lose their pursuers or to catch up to Sasuke faster, Shikamaru wasn't sure.

Sighing in exasperation at Naruto's comment, Shikamaru shook his head in annoyance but soon focused on thinking over all their choices. Ambush... no... These are subordinates of Orochimaru, a former Leaf Shinobi, which means that they've probably studied the Fire Countries geography and landscape. That only leaves... decoy... fun... Shikamaru finished up this thought process with a very sarcastic mental voice. Damn... It's so troublesome...

"Oi! Naruto! Slow down, drop me off somewhere!" Pulling Naruto's jacket to get his attention, Shikamaru called out to him.

Lifting an eyebrow in question, Naruto gazed at Shikamaru with a confused gaze even while he fully complied with Shikamaru's demands, slowing down Kirin's progress until they finally stopped, hovering over a close tree branch.

Shikamaru jumped off the large fox's back, landing neatly onto the thick branch, before turning to Naruto to explain his plan of action:

"I'll stay back and ambush them. Don't worry about me, go after Sasuke!"

Blinking at the notion of an 'ambush', Naruto quickly nodded in acceptance, not even taking the time to think over Shikamaru's actions before hurrying off after Sasuke again, leaving a swift burst of wind behind in his wake. Shikamaru sighed as he shook and patted all the fallen leaves off of his body, leaves of which had just been plucked off their branches by Naruto's sudden flash of force and power.

Shaking his head in irritation, Shikamaru wondered if he really had done the right thing, lying to Naruto like that. Doesn't matter. What he doesn't know can't hurt him. He'll take care of Gaara and Sasuke, while I take care of the Sound ninjas. The only difference being that I'm acting as a decoy, not an ambusher. His mind concluded and Shikamaru slowly started off to set his traps and fake tracks.

Naruto blinked as his body suddenly flinched in sight pain. Usually, he wouldn't have paid any attention to these minor details of his body's reactions. However, ever since he started learning how to use the Yochigan (Prediction's Eye), his Aunt Ruri had told him that sometimes, the Yochigan is subconsciously activated, and when its predictions are relating information to your mind on a subconscious level, your body would automatically react to it in strange ways. Examples include a whole range of different reactions such as a slight shaking of the hands, a burning sensation in the heart, a small prick on your limbs or as this case indicates, or a sudden flinch of pain. All of which meant that something bad is about to happen or is already happening.

Narrowing his eyes in concentration, Naruto thought over everything he had done that day and wondered what could be going wrong. Sasuke... but there's nothing I can do about that until I get there... Sakura and the others... no, Kakashi and the other Jounins are there already. I'm sure that the third Hokage would have warned them to prepare for a surprise attack. Aunt Ruri and Kaga-san can take care

of themselves easily enough so WHO is it! Trying again, Naruto mentally listed out all the people that had come to mean something to him, and thought over what could be happening to them currently.

Instantly, his eyes widened in shock. OF COURSE! Shikamaru! That bastard! He's not doing any ambush! He must have stayed behind as a decoy! I'm SUCH AN IDIOT!!! Naruto mentally berated himself.

Taking a few seconds to continue scolding himself, Naruto finally pushed aside his self-condemnation and concentrated on finding a solution. I can't turn back! Sasuke needs me! So what should I do?? Naruto slightly panicked over what course of action he should take. Suddenly, a low whimpering sound made it through his raging thoughts. He looked up to gaze directly into Kibi well meaning eyes, and all of a sudden, he had a solution.

"Kibi! Run back to Shikamaru and keep him safe. Once that battle is over, watch over him until you both return safely to Konoha. Do not come after me! I have Kirin to keep me company, okay?" He asked his pet fox gently, knowing that it was far more intelligent than anyone gives it credit for.

Nodding once in acknowledgement and acceptance, Kibi suddenly jumped off his companion's back and landed lightly onto a thick tree branch while Naruto and Kirin rushed past him without another word back. Narrowing his eyes in concentration and growling low at his master's firm command, Kibi raced back to where they had dropped off Shikamaru. Through smell, Kibi could tell that the ninjas were already upon Shikamaru's location and that the boy was waiting for them.

Watching from behind a tree, Shikamaru waited until all 8 of the Sound Shinobis stood close together to look over the strange footprints on the ground. After all, they had been chasing broken branches and a large amount of newly plucked leaves as tracks, not newly formed footprints. They were curious as to why the prey had suddenly stopped flying and land on the ground. Their short moment

of curiosity is all it took for Shikamaru to capture all of them in his Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Copy Technique).

Shikamaru huffed slightly as he counted the number of Shinobis trapped within his Jutsu and ignored the enemy Ninja's rather blunt underestimation of his abilities. 8... there should be 9... Reaching into his pouch and producing sharp shurikens gripped by all his fingers, he aimed and then threw them directly at his trapped enemies.

Watching carefully as all of his shurikens were deflected by kunais and other flying weapons, Shikamaru noted that his final enemy was hidden up a near by tree and quickly threw several of his own kunais into said tree, forcing the hidden Shinobi to jump out of the way and reveal himself.

Knowing that his chances of winning in close hand combat is practically nil as Shikamaru would have easily caught him, the Sound Shinobi decided to assault Shikamaru with multiple kunais and shurikens, some of which were caught by Shikamaru to deflect all others. The fight quickly turned into a weapon's throwing match to see who had the most weapons and how accurate they could throw them. Soon, both opponents had ran out of weapons.

Shikamaru, having to keep his Kagemane no Jutsu through out the entire throwing match, was quite battered and bruised with many cuts on his body, though none were too deep. He had kept most of the dangerous aims away. He took some time to calm his racing heart and gulped in some much needed air while still warily watching his opponent.

The Sound Nin, having lost his entire set of throwing weapons, finally realised that through out the match, he had not once performed any seals. Immediately, he launched himself into a set of seals, ready and waiting to kill Shikamaru at the shortest notice.

Shikamaru, noticing the seals, instantly started created his own and hoped that he had enough Chakra to keep on going. It's seems the

set of Seals Shikamaru had performed were much shorter than the Sound Nins, and so he completed them before the Sound Nin's own.

Kageho! (Shadow Walk) Shikamaru's body quickly sunk into his own shadow and disappeared in a blink of an eye, surprising all of his captive enemies, who have all been freed once Shikamaru released the Shadow Bind. Thinking that the kid had run away, the Sound Nins were brought back from their cheerful musings abruptly as one of their own comrades screamed in pain.

Turning quickly to see what's going on, the rest of the Sound Nin group only caught a glimpse of Shikamaru slipping back into his own shadow while one of their own was lying on the floor clutching on to his bleeding stomach with much pain written across his face. It was in that instant that another one of their group shouted in alarm, and once again, the rest turned just in time to see Shikamaru slipping back into another shadow while their compatriot simply fell onto the hard ground, unmoving, with a Kunai struck into his eyes.

It was at that moment that the Sound Nins realised what a dangerous situation they were in. If Shikamaru could seemingly travel between shadows, they were completely surrounded by shadows (under the forest canopy), then Shikamaru could theoretically easily kill them all, without even fully leaving the safety of his shadows.

What the Sound Nins didn't understand is that during the throwing match, Shikamaru had continuously thrown Kunai after Kunai, all with the special teleportation note attached to them. And so, surrounding this entire clearing are his special kunais, all of which gives him access to the shadow teleportation. However, there is a limit to his ability in attacking his enemy since they have to be physically close to one of his special kunais so that he could quickly come out, attack them, and then re-enter the shadow. Another disadvantage with using this technique now is that Shikamaru is running dangerously low on Chakra at the moment, and if he loses all his Chakra while still inside one of these shadow realms, he may well be trapped in there forever.

After a few minutes of playing cat and mouse, whereby Shikamaru hunts his prey from the shadows and the prey jumps around continuously, making it very difficult for Shikamaru to even react before they jump out of the way. Too soon it seems that Shikamaru had finally ran out of Chakra, making it dangerous for him to stay in the shadow and so, he finally revealed himself panting and shaking slightly on one of the nearby tree's branches. Shivering in exhaustion, Shikamaru could only watch with reluctance at the suddenly delighted expressions on the Sound Nin's faces as they launched themselves at him.

Sighing in resignation, Shikamaru closed his eyes and waited for what's to come. Damn. I knew this was gonna be troublesome, why did I ever get involve in the first place. Man... And I was so looking forward to being just an okay Ninja, marry a regular girl, have two kids, a girl then a boy, perhaps retire young and spend the rest of my days playing go or shogi until I die... It was such a good dream... Heh... Too bad life's not that predictable... These were the last thoughts that Shikamaru had flashed through in his mind.

Suddenly, a huge gust of wind burst through the clearing, knocking all of the Sound Nins back, forcing them to land haphazardly across the ground or onto trees. Shikamaru used the rest of his strength to grip tightly onto the tree he was perched on. After the wind subsided, he looked down in slight surprise only to find Kibi growling angrily at the Sound Nins. Well. Well. Well. Looks like Naruto left me a present. He smiled to himself, releasing some of the tension on his shoulders as a sign of hope finally emerged to rescue him. Well. Let's see if the fox listens to me too...

"Kibi! Kazedan! (Wind Bullets)" Having remembered all the names of the moves Naruto during his Preliminary fight with Kiba, Shikamaru decided to see if he had any influence on the fox's action too.

After blinking in confusion at the black haired boy, it seems as if Kibi made a mental note to himself to obey the seemingly strange boy. After all, the boy was Kaga-san's new apprentice and seems to be responsible enough to command it, and so, Kibi followed in

Shikamaru's order by performing several Kazedans aimed at the Sound Nins, whom quickly avoided the multiple blasts by jumping away.

Raising an eyebrow in surprise, Shikamaru smirked at the new found power Naruto had gifted him. Well. I'm certainly not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Kibi! HoShuiHo! (Water Cannon) Then follow up with a Da Rai! (Lightning Strike)" Shikamaru called out to Kibi.

The Sound Nins, still not completely believing that they were currently fighting a fox of all beings, were unprepared for the assault as Kibi launched its powerful water cannon attack at them. The force of the water current smashed many of the ninjas against tree stumps and hard rocks. Straight after the water came the lightning. The electrical currents followed the water's passage and electrocuted all of the Sound Shinobis easily.

Shikamaru whistled in appreciation. Wow! No wonder Kiba was beaten to a pulp. This fox packs quite a punch!

After the two assaults, all the Sound Nins were either rendered unconscious or dead, and so Shikamaru gave a short sigh of relief, as he no longer had to fight. Looking over at Kibi's still waiting form he lifted an eyebrow in curiosity. "Why are you still here? Aren't you supposed to go to Naruto?" Surprisingly, the fox shook its head as if indicating a 'no'. Shikamaru tried again. "Are you waiting for me to come with you, so that both of us would catch up with Naruto?" Again, the response was the shaking of heads.

Frowning slightly, Shikamaru tried a third time. "Are you supposed to escort me back to the Hidden Leaf?" This time, the fox responded with a nod. Sighing in annoyance at having a 'fox' of all creatures as one's bodyguard, Shikamaru slowly climbed down from his perch on the tree's branch and started slowly making his way back home, leaving the Sound Nins dead or alive where they lay. Following him almost demurely is Kibi fox, taking its body-guarding task very seriously. Shikamaru sighed again.

Naruto gritted his teeth as he finally launched both Kirin and himself into the open battlefield that Sasuke and Gaara had so obviously fought in just moments before. He had made it just in time to see Gaara (in his half demon form) jump across to attack the fallen Sasuke, and from the looks of it, Sasuke was unable to move due to the activation of the curse seal that has been implanted into his body. Without even thinking about it, Naruto instantly rammed Kirin straight into Gaara, knocking the demon boy back to where he had originated, while Naruto smoothly jumped off Kirin's back to land next to Sasuke.

Other than the seal activating and sucking all of Sasuke's Chakra, he doesn't seem to have any other major injury. However, I'm not that good with sealing jutsus either so there's practically nothing I could do to help! Damn it! I wish Aunt Ruri would have taught me some of the special Uzumaki seals!! Naruto thought frantically as he checked over Sasuke's body with a critical eye.

Finally concluding that his teammate was okay for now, Naruto turned his attention to Gaara and for the first time, seriously looked over what had happened to the Sand Shinobi. Naruto shifted his gaze from the ears to the eyes to both the boy's appendages and finally to the tail. So... This is the form of Shukaku, the Tanuki demon. Naruto concluded with mental calmness, though a small spark of pain was emitted from his heart as he gazed into the eyes of the demon. Naruto didn't let himself dwell too much on the background of Gaara, for he knew that his enemy would not have any sympathy for him in return.

"Kirin! Take Sasuke out of here. Return him to Konoha." His pet fox looked at him with a questioning gaze, only to be met back with a very determined expression. After a silent moment of contemplation, she agreed to her master's demand.

"Naruto... No... I can... I can still fight!" Sasuke tried to protest; saying that he was okay and able to help out, but he was met with an unmoved, almost angry look from Naruto. Both boys glared at each

other for a long moment, both too stubborn to admit defeat, and too prideful to let the other win. "I can still fight! Naruto!" Sasuke growled, angry with himself for not being strong enough to even take on the Sand Nin.

"NO YOU CAN'T!!! Admit it! Sasuke! You're already at your limit's end! There's no way you can continue fighting. Just get out of here before you become a burden to ME!" Naruto yelled back, subconsciously knowing that he had taken a direct blow at Sasuke's pride but knowing the black haired boy, this was the only way for him to win the argument.

Narrowing his eyes in intense hate and self-loathing, Sasuke stopped arguing all together and glared at something else, ignoring Naruto's pointed look. Damn HIM! How dare he treat me like this!? I'm not a child to be protected! I'm not some weakling that he has to be watched over! I'm not weak!!!! I can still fight!!! Sasuke mentally screamed at himself, but deep inside, he questioned himself. Am I strong enough yet? Am I still so weak? Have I even improved???

Taking the boy's silence as a sign of acceptance, Naruto heaved Sasuke's unmoving body onto Kirin's back and helped the boy get settled comfortably. Once everything was done and over with, Kirin quickly blasted off in the direction of the Leaf again, leaving behind her master to fight the Tanuki demon alone.

"It's just you and me now. Gaara. Or should I say... Shukaku." Naruto stated calmly while Gaara flinched at the name.

" **WHAT DO YOU KNOW!!!!???**" Gaara roared at Naruto, angry that he had taken his prey away from him, but deep inside, he was actually zealously happy that another prey had showed himself, one much stronger than the Uchiha.

"I know enough. Let's get this started then, shall we?" Naruto narrowed his eyes in concentration. Though reluctant, he knew that he had to make contact with Kyuubi once more, knowing that he would need the Fox Lord's help more than ever at this moment in

time. Only a demon can defeat a demon, huh... That was what Aunt Ruri told me. I don't have a choice...

Within the dark abyss of Naruto's mind, two voices rang out to each other.

"Kyuubi!!!"

" What do you want now, kit?"

"I'm going to fight Shukaku, and I'll be needing your help. If you're willing, please spare me some extra Chakra."

A short pause followed Naruto's rare plead for help. Indeed, it wasn't everyday that Naruto asked the Kyuubi for assistance at all, let alone twice in one day, so the Kyuubi decided to be pliant. **"Take as much as you need, Kit. But don't lose yourself to the power."**

"I know. I will."

" Good luck then. Kick that Sand Bastard's ass for me."

"Will do."

Eyes blazing with determination and resolve, Naruto quickly performed his favourite set of seals. "Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!" Immediately, hundred and hundreds of Naruto replications suddenly surrounded the entire forested area. It was an army of Naruto clones. Gaara gapped in shock at the skill level of Naruto as well as wondering about Naruto's seemingly huge Chakra stamina.

"All Right! Everybody! Let's GO!!!" yelled the original Naruto as the rest of the swarm jumped into action, all rushing towards Gaara like a mad hive of bees intent on their prey.

Gaara reacted in response; pulling both its demonic arms together and then flinging them outwards, releasing a huge barrage of sand missiles at the clones. "Suna Shuriken!! (Sand Shuriken)" Gaara yelled. Once he finished with one side of the swarm, he immediately set about doing the same to the other side, each time changing angels to direct his attack on a different group of Kage Bunshins. However, to his disappointment, it seems his attack was doing very little against the army of Naruto clones as they continued their pursuit.

Even though some of the Bunshins had disappeared due to the impact of the Shuriken, the rest just kept on their path towards Gaara without hesitation. Some of the Bunshins themselves started performing seals of their own and as a result, created even more Kage Bunshins than before. It was a never-ending cycle of infinite numbers of Naruto clones to deal with.

During Gaara's short duration of shocked underestimation, the horde of Naruto clones had already reached his location. "Naruto Ninpocho! Shihou Hapo Shuriken no Maki! (Naruto Technique Book! The No-Escape Shuriken Chapter) (3)" The swarm of Naruto clones yelled as all of them withdrew shurikens and threw them at Gaara.

Gaara managed to dodge some but was unable to avoid all of the hundreds of shurikens. And in his instance of covering himself with his sand made arms, he noticed too late as around four of the Naruto clones had managed to sneak into his personal space. "U... ZU... MA... KI!" Each of the four clones yelled as they followed the first stance of Konoha's famous Omote Renge (Initial Lotus), first performed by Lee then copied by Sasuke. Their four powerful kicks from below launched Gaara off his feet and into the air, even though he was incredibly heavy with all the sand covering his body to begin with.

"Uzumaki Naruto Nisen Rendan no Maki!! (Uzumaki Naruto Two Thousand Hit Combo Chapter) (4)" The assembly of Naruto clones shouted in a uniform manner. Unfortunately for Naruto, Gaara had

gathered he's wits while still in the air to perform his own Jutsu against the incoming clones.

"Fuuton: Mugen Sajin Daitopa!! (Wind Element: Eternal Sandstorm Blast)" Gaara called as he took in a deep breath of air and then released it at the arriving Bunshins. Some of them were blasted away and disappeared into puffs of smoke, however, there were still many more which took the original's places. Soon after, Gaara was put under a barrage of punches; almost one thousand punches made it through his sand barrier and impacted on his body.

Two last punches later, Gaara was thrown onto the hard ground of the forest floor, crashing into the earth and creating dust clouds in his wake. He gazed back up at the still seemingly large number of Naruto clones still heading his way. His eyes narrowed in fury. **How dare he... How dare he HURT MEEEE!!!!**

" I WON'T LOSE TO THE LIKES OF YOU!!!!" Gaara cried as he activated his transforming Jutsu, giving himself almost completely to Shukaku. Inside Gaara, the demon within was very tense, waiting almost in anticipation of fighting this interesting specimen of a human being that the blonde Shinobi made. Not many have been able to cause the Shukaku carrier such injury and warranted him to use this Jutsu. This fight would definitely turn interesting.

During the transformation stage, almost all of the clones were caught in the upsurge of Gaara's new form rising out of the trees and almost reaching the clouds, the sharp spikes of Shukaku's coat speared through many of the clones and rendered them dead while the real Naruto escaped without harm.

Naruto watched impassively as all his clones disappeared into smoke either by Gaara's act of retaliation or by his own will. He thought to himself. So this is Shukaku's real form... Narrowing his eyes in anger, Naruto looked around at the surrounding forest that was to be their battleground. Damn, if we fight here now, the entire landscape will be destroyed! But if we don't fight here... I can't let Shukaku get anywhere near Konoha!

The skies above them suddenly turned into a greyish hue, darkening the entire area like an eclipse of the sun. Both Shukaku and Naruto looked up in surprise at what they saw. A flat, horizontal surface of what looked like a lightly shaded shadow form stretched out from directly above them to the outer reaches of entire forest. And then, it abruptly stopped expanding horizontally and started falling vertically downwards, reaching the ground in just a few seconds. Both opponents watched dazedly as the walls of the silhouetted prism darkened slightly, recolouring everything within its walls into black, white or grey tones. Naruto and Shukaku being the only exception.

It's Kaga-san's Kage no Kekai! (Shadow Prison) The third stage of the Kage Michi (Way of the Shadow)! (5) This is the first time I've ever seen it being used! Naruto took some time to gaze in wonder around him at the special Shadow technique while Shukaku frowned, not knowing what to expect. The Kage no Kekai (Shadow Prison) is a technique that locks the combatants into another virtual reality created by the user. Basically, any damage done by the combatants INSIDE the prison will not affect the outside, real world. This way, no matter how fierce we fight, we won't damage any of the real environment. Perfect! Naruto grinned to himself.

" WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!!!???" Shukaku demanded as he swung his tail around in agitation. Deciding action is better than words; Shukaku took an offensive stance instead of waiting for what's to happen. Lifting its giant hand and directing it at Naruto's direction, Shukaku Gaara summoned forth his attack. **"Sabaku! Sou.. (Desert Coff...)."**

Sand had instantly materialised surrounding Naruto's form when Shukaku Gaara had lifted its demonic arm, and as Gaara called forth the attack, the sand tightened painfully. However, Naruto was still able to move slightly within the tightened sand. And so, he quickly took advantage of his current freedom of movement, biting his thumb to draw blood and launching both his hands into a short set of hand seals. Just before Gaara was able to complete his technique on

Naruto, Naruto called forth his own Jutsu. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!!! (Summoning Technique!!!)"

The sheer power of the summoning blasted away the sand imprisoning Naruto. That was because Naruto had summoned forth the most powerful of Toads, the boss toad himself, Gama Bunta. As the smoke clouds cleared, its massive form loomed over the horizon; just its size would be enough to strike fear in most enemies.

Gama Bunta lifted its age-old gaze to the figure on top of its head. **"Oi! Naruto!!! What did you call me out here for!!! I'm a busy TOAD KING you know!"** Gama Bunta complained as he glared slightly at the blonde boy. (6) Looking around at the strange greyish landscape, Gama Bunta grunted in surprise. **"AND WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO THE LANDSCAPE?!"** He called out in confusion.

"Gama Oyabin... (Old man Toad) I'll need your help to defeat Shukaku no Suna (Shukaku of the Desert). It seems Kaga-san has trapped us inside his Kage Akukan (Shadow Space) so that we won't be damaging any of the real world environment. So, what do say? Are you going to help me?" Naruto calmly requested, his gaze never leaving the impassive face of the sand demon.

Gama Bunta grumbled slightly under his breath as he looked on to his new enemy. Suna no Shukaku... Not an easy enemy to fight off... Damn, I'm getting too old for this... **"Oi, Naruto. What if I said no?"** Gama Bunta taunted the boy on top of his head.

Naruto only smirked in response. "Then I guess I'll just have to invite one of your sons to do the battle for you." Naruto taunted back confidently.

Gama Bunta's eyes narrowed in slight resentment at the response, but he knew that Naruto wasn't lying. Even with the boy's ability, Naruto would find it very hard pressed to even fight equally with a real demon without help. **"Heh, guess I don't have much choice,**

do I?" Gama Bunta grumbled again as he slowly pulled out his short sword strapped to his sides.

Gripping the swords in such a way that the sword's edge glimmered directly across to Shukaku, Gama Bunta grunted a warning to Naruto to hold on tight as he launched himself at the demon in front of them, intending to slash Shukaku to pieces. The materialised forest directly underneath Gama Bunta's feet were instantly crushed under his heavy weight while many other smaller trees were pulled from their roots and tossed aside simply by the massive current of wind caused by Gama Bunta's movements.

" GAMA NO TSURUGI KAI!!! (TOAD BLADE SLASH)!" Gama Bunta shouted as he swung his blade in the direction of the Demon. He slammed his short sword into the shoulder of Shukaku, pressing forward with his entire weight, then twisted the blade and pulled with all his might. Getting angry, Shukaku pushed forward with his hardened sand made body, which forced Gama Bunta to jump out of the way, losing his favourite sword as a result. But the assault wasn't a total loss; the sharp edge of the sword had been able to slash off one arm of Shukaku, disintegrating it into sand particles once the appendage had left the original body and leaving Shukaku one arm short.

Even though the successful slash had warranted some good fortune, but Gama Bunta wasn't celebrating just yet, as he panted and looked at his shaking hands (still suffering from the strain of the force used to retaliate against Shukaku).

In front of Gama Bunta and Naruto however, Shukaku Gaara started shaking in suppressed mirth, until finally, the amusement of fighting Naruto got to him and he released a frightening and yet neurotic laugh that shook Naruto and Gama Bunta to their cores. **"UZUMAKI NARUTO... IT HAS BEEN FUN FIGHTING YOU... BUT NOW... YOU DIE!!!"** Shukaku gasped as his laughter died. Upon Shukaku's head, a strange and yet familiar form emerged from the hardened sand surface.

"Gaara..." Naruto mumbled as he gazed intently at the Sand medium, already guessing what is to come next. Gripping tighter to Gama Bunta's head in an effort not to slip off in the ensuing battle, Naruto warned the boss toad. "Better be careful from now on, Gama Oyabin. He's gonna set free the demon within!"

" **Don't you think I know that!!?**" Gama Bunta shouted back in annoyance while his body tensed at the anticipation of fighting the real spirit of the Sand demon.

Gaara placed his hands together in a seal and whispered to himself. "Tanuki Neri no Jutsu (Fake Sleep Technique)." Once Gaara was asleep, the real Shukaku awakened.

Suddenly, an inhuman scream rang through out the clearing, high pitched and loud. **"YAHOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!"** The Tanuki demon stretched its neck upwards, puffing its chest out to draw in a deep breath of fresh air. **"I'M FINALLY ABLE TO COME OUT!!!!"** Shukaku shifted its gaze towards the slightly stunned Naruto and Gama Bunta. Directing its finger at them, Shukaku called out. **"SUDDENLY, I FIND A GUY I REALLY WANT TO KILL!!!! YOU HEAR THAT!!! I'M GONNA KILL YOU!!!!"**

Naruto blinked in astonishment. "That's Shukaku?" He asked in a quiet voice.

" **He's unexpectedly funky, isn't he?**" Gama Bunta grumbled as he pulled out the pipe in his mouth. **"We're going to jump."** He warned the boy.

"Got ya." Naruto confirmed as he tightened his grip once more.

" **FUUTON: RENKUDAN!! (Wind Element: Steroid Blanks)**" Shukaku screamed as he collected a large amount of Chakra into the palm of his hand, slammed the palm into his stomach and blasted out a very powerful wind blast from his mouth, directly aiming at where Naruto and Gama Bunta is situated.

Gama Bunta jumped just in time to avoid the powerful blast that created a large impact crater at the place he had stood just moments before. While still in the air, he performed his own Jutsu to retaliate.

"Suito Teppo Dama!! (Water Cannonball)" Gama Bunta called out as he released one large water bomb at Shukaku.

Shukaku deflected the attack by destroying it with another one of his Renkudan's (Steroid Blanks). The resulting mix of water and wind created a typhoon like atmosphere where water and wind was sprayed everywhere, flooding the land and pulling trees off their roots. Luckily, they were fighting inside a shadow realm, or else the entire landscape really would have changed for the worst.

Shukaku launched several more Renkudans at Gama Bunta. On the other hand, Gama Bunta continued to retaliate with his own Teppo Dama while still jumping around to avoid the windblasts.

Unfortunately for Gama Bunta though, one of the Renkudans was able to make it through his assaults and actually hit him right in the face, the following explosion literary covered the entire sky in smoke.

" YAHOOOOO! I DID IT!! I KILLED HIM!!! KILLED HIM!!!!!"

Shukaku cheered as he swung his single arm around like a victory dance, only to be stopped abruptly when Gama Bunta landed heavily onto the ground in front of him, slightly singed but not much worse for wear.

" DAMN IT!! THAT REALLY HURT!!!!!" Gama Bunta roared in fury.
"YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT!!!!!"

Naruto coughed some of the smoke out of his system and looked up at the current situation they were in. SHIT! There's no way Gama Bunta can take another of those blasts. And continuing on with this cat and mouse chase isn't gonna help us any either. We'll soon run out of precious Chakra instead! Naruto thought frantically to himself as Gama Bunta tried to grip tightly onto Shukaku to stop his movements but to no avail.

That was when Naruto got an idea. What was it that Aunt Ruri said again? Only a demon can defeat another demon... So that's what she meant. Yet again, Naruto took some long seconds to debate over the merits of his idea, reluctant once again to go ask the one being in which had caused his life a lot of pain and yet seemed to be the only salvation offered to him currently. Damn it! This is the third time in one day!! Mentally scolding himself, Naruto promised that he would never ask Kyuubi for such consecutive help later in his life. It's now or never... Damn. I hate owing the fox!

"Oi! Gama Oyabin! I've got an idea I wanna try but you might not like it!" Naruto yelled at Gama Bunta trying to catch his attention.

" **WHAT DO YOU WANT?! I'M KINDA BUSY HERE!!!**" Gama Bunta exclaimed as he made a jump to avoid another one of Shukaku's Renkudans.

"Let's do a Konbi Henge no Jutsu (Combined Transformation Technique) so that we turn into a creature that has fangs and claws to catch the Shukaku!" Naruto suggested as he dodged flying debris, probably a part of a tree. He paused for a moment before launching into the difficult part about the plan. "I want you to allow the Kyuubi to have some control over our movements."

" **WHAT!!!!!!**" Gama Bunta roared in shock at Naruto's suggested, almost having his head blown off again by an incoming wind blast but dodged just in time. **"YOU want ME to let that GOD FORSAKEN FOX to take control of MY body!!!! HELL NOOOOOO!!!!"**

"Just listen! The Kyuubi has abilities that none of us have. It will most definitely be able to hold Shukaku off while I try to wake Gaara. We have to do this, Gama Oyabin, we don't have a choice!" Naruto persuaded Gama Bunta as best he could, willing the old Toad to understand the seriousness of their situation. He shared the same inherent mistrust of the fox as Gama Bunta - though to a lesser degree of course, but still, the current situation demanded it. And so,

Naruto was willing to push aside his pride and innate fear of the fox's power to allow for this one incident.

Gama Bunta knew this – he knew that the kid wouldn't have even come up with the idea if the situation didn't call for it, which is why he eventually agreed. **"Keep the fox out of my mind, Naruto!"** Gama Bunta grunted out threateningly.

Naruto smiled slightly at the small sign of acceptance, though a shiver of fear ran through his spine. This would be the first time he had ever willingly let the fox have control of anything concerning his body or actions since the incident with Elle. "I will, I promise." He spoke, more confidently than he actually felt. After that, he closed his eyes again to concentrate on reaching the demon within himself.

"Oi! Kyuubi! Mind if you give me more than just your Chakra?" Naruto's slightly timid voice rang through the darkness.

" YOU WANT ME TO HELP THAT PATHETIC EXCUSE OF A TOAD, THE SAME TOAD THAT HELPED IMPRISON ME HERE IN THIS CAGE!!!! ARE YOU INSANE!!!!?????" A deep growl followed the screeching exclamation as Kyuubi screamed his dissatisfaction.

A soft gulp could be heard from Naruto's mental figure. "Well... yes... just consider it for a bit, Kyuubi. I'm letting you out for a short amount of time and even giving you a temporary body to do actual combat with Shukaku. All you really need to do is keep him busy while I try to knock some sense back into Gaara. Gama Bunta is already dangerously low on Chakra even though he won't admit it. This fight can't last any longer." Naruto explained patiently.

Swallowing his pride, Naruto uttered. "PLEASE... pretty please... for me..." Naruto pleaded in his innocent child-like voice. He had found out during his time in the Hidden Air village that the Kyuubi seem to have somehow adopted him as one of its kits surprisingly, and as such, was rather protective of him and his welfare. However, the

change in attitude the fox had towards Naruto did not change the fact that Naruto was still afraid of it.

Through the years after his Aunt Ruri had set up the new seal, Naruto had slowly grown accustomed to having the fox sometime invade his thoughts or feel the emotions of the fox shared through their connection. He had come to realise that there was a very small chance he would ever be rid of the creature sealed inside of him, and as such, was simply content to just communicate with it from time to time. It gave him a sense that he wasn't completely alone, that his troubles would at least be shared with some one else, something else. For that, he was grateful to the fox.

But that didn't mean his sense of peace had eradicated the intrinsic uneasiness that came with the idea of actually using its powers. Naruto knew he still suffered the psychological effects of his time with Elle and he hated that he would always carry such a weakness in him. Even though the Kyuubi had proven itself to be more than willing to give part of its Chakra up when needed, Naruto was still very careful when and where he ever asked for it. After all, what's the point of letting Chakra stay inside the cage, never to be used or see the light of day? It'd be such a waste.

After a lot of mumbling, grumbling, complaining and growling (as a last resort against Naruto), Kyuubi stayed silence, which in itself, is a sign of its acceptance, though only reluctantly. Naruto finally smirked. Shukaku won't know what hit him.

Opening his eyes again, Naruto quickly performed the seal, gathering his Chakra, the Kyuubi's Chakra, and what's left of Gama Bunta's Chakra to make a combination Jutsu. "Konbi Henge no Jutsu (Combined Transformation Technique)" Naruto yelled as a large cloud of smoke suddenly covered the clearing. An instance after the transformation, a new form launched itself out of the thick smoke.

At first, Shukaku was confused at what this new creature entailed, but once it could focus completely on the new form, its eyes widened in slight fear, for in front of him was none other than the Lord of Hell itself, Kyuubi no Kitsune. Not believing that the creature in front of it could possibly be the great lord Kyuubi, Shukaku took this transformation as an insult to the Demon kind and immediately threw forth another Renkudan at the fake fox.

Kyuubi/Gama Bunta just smirked in response and stood still. **"You think that would even leave a scratch on ME!???"** The red furred fox roared out that last word as he swung two of his massive tails in a wide arc and flipped forth a windblast of its own at Shukaku. To call it just a 'wind blast' would be an offence to its raw power, it was more like a hurricane force of its own. The impact of the Renkudan on this fearsome force didn't even leave a dent, in fact the Tsunami like wind force ripped the entire clearing of all its objects; trees, dirt, animals, rocks, anything and everything was ripped from its roots and flung backwards. Even Shukaku itself found it difficult to grip the loose ground underneath its feet, and it was a 'sand' demon too.

Forced to slide backwards several hundred metres, Shukaku finally came to a stop as the hurricane winds died down, only to open its eyes to find the Kyuubi look-alike gone from in front of it. A deep growl sounded out from beside Shukaku. **"Looking for me?"** Shukaku reacted instinctively, swerving around and pushing himself backwards to keep the fox away from its vulnerable back, while still swinging its sand tail at the impostor in an offensive move.

The fox caught Shukaku's tail easily with one of its paws, and then slammed the appendage hard onto the ground, stepping directly on top of it to keep it still. Kyuubi/Gama Bunta bared its teeth at the Tanuki demon. **"Surprised? You should be... I'm not just a pretty face, you know..."** The combination transformed creature growled loudly in a very threatening manner.

That was when Shukaku finally realised that its assumption was wrong. **"Kyuubi?"** The creature literally stuttered the name out of its

slightly slack jawed mouth.

" Nice to know you're not as dumb as you look." The fox growled again before ramming itself forward, slamming its body against the Tanuki's (making Shukaku wince at the pain) and then gripped the Sand demon with both his fore front claws and teeth, even wrapping his tail around the Tanuki to keep it from moving a single inch. Once Shukaku has been securely imprisoned, the fox growled in command. **"Naruto! Do it NOW!"**

The single form of Naruto suddenly launched himself off of Kyuubi/Gama Bunta's head. However, since the medium performing the Jutsu is gone, so did the Jutsu itself. A loud explosion sounded out as the legendary Kyuubi returned itself back into its cage, leaving a disgruntled looking Gama Bunta behind to handle Shukaku and keep it still. Naruto fell with style, aiming directly at Gaara and finally, when he was close enough, he punched Gaara with all the raw strength of his fist, without any added influences from any of his techniques.

" NOOOO! I ONLY JUST GOT MY FREEDOM!!!! NOOOooooo" Howled Shukaku as his eyes slowly turned back to a glazed hazel brown from its furious golden hue just moments ago. It could do nothing more than withdraw reluctantly back into the abyss as its host slowly awakened from slumber.

Seeing that Gaara had finally awoken from his technique, Naruto ran forward at the red haired boy, intending to finish this off once and for all. Gaara glared at the Leaf Shinobi with all his worth, and tried to summon forth his sand to stop the boy. Unfortunately for Gaara, with just a wave of his arm and hand, Naruto was able to knock all the sand away using the Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wraith) that he had just performed on himself after he punched Gaara. The Sand once again tried to trap Naruto's feet, but Naruto saw the action, enhanced his legs with the Tenshi no Doki and jumped himself off the sand surface, quickly reaching Gaara's location.

With the Tenshi no Doki still in hand, Naruto strengthened the power of his fist and slammed it at Gaara's face for the second time that day, a resounding crack of fist hitting flesh can easily be heard by Gama Bunta as he watched in avid shock at the way Naruto chose to end the fight. Though powerful, the move was completely inelegant... Gama Bunta thought to himself as he released his grip on the Sand demon, since it had already started breaking apart and disintegrating into sand particles, falling to the ground like harmless dust.

Gama Bunta then grunted in slight fatigue as he watched Naruto fall too. Seeing that the boy was okay as he landed lightly on his feet onto the ground, while the Sand boy had landed with a hard thump, literary crashing onto the Earth's hard surface. Sighing, Gama Bunta released the rest of his body's tension and decided that now would be a good time to go on since the battle had already been won, which is exactly what he did. The resulting dust cloud created by Gama Bunta's disappearance (including his short sword) shook the ground slightly but didn't really affect the two original combatants much.

As if awaiting the ending of this fight, the Kage no Kekai (Shadow Prison) slowly dissolved into nothingness. Naruto in silent awe as their wasteland of a battleground slowly disappeared, as the original green forest of the fire country took its place. There were still birds in the trees, a soft wind rustling the leaves and the fresh dirt underneath their feet. It was a surreal experience, fighting within the Shadow prison and then returning to reality, almost like a dream even.

Naruto blinked to clear away his nostalgic thoughts and looked directly at the fallen boy in front of him calmly. Taking one step forward followed by another, Naruto slowly walked towards Gaara's unmoving form. Seeing his enemy approach, Gaara panicked. "Don't come any closer! My existence will not disappear! I won't allow it! I won't die! I refuse to die!!" Gaara shouted with all the conviction he

had left, but Naruto didn't heed his warning and continued to walk towards him until he was standing right in front of the red haired boy.

With a very sad expression on his face, Naruto knelt down next to the boy and for a long while, they both waited, until Naruto finally decided to start talking to him, gently, softly. "It's not easy, is it... To be a demon carrier... I know..." Gaara continued to glare at the boy but still held a hint of fear and panic evident in his slightly confused eyes. "I know what it's like... to be trapped in the hell that is known as loneliness... I know what it's like... to be hunted down by your own kinsmen..." At this, Gaara's eyes widened slightly in surprise.

"I know exactly how you feel... because I hold the same destiny..." Naruto trailed off slightly as his eyes glazed in remembrance, soon after though, he shook his head to clear off all thoughts on the past, and continued his speech with more conviction. "But I have precious people that are close to my heart now, and I won't allow you or anyone else to hurt them." Naruto glared at the Sand boy. "Even if I have to kill you, I won't let you hurt my friends and family, my home."

"Why..." Gaara whispered in confusion, needing to know the truth. "Why would you go so far for others?"

"Emotions are not weaknesses, Gaara. The greatest of strength comes from those who wish to protect their family and home. My family, my friends... they pulled me out of the darkness of my own heart, my own dark soul. They gave me a reason to live, not just to exist. They acknowledged me for who I am... That is why... they are precious to me." Naruto explained patiently as if he was talking to a child, and in a sense, Gaara still was a child.

Gaara remembered a long lost conversation he had had with his ex-guardian. Love... He remembered the meaning behind that word and the power it can inflict. That's why he's so strong. However, Gaara was quickly pulled out of his musings when several shurikens were launched at Naruto, and two familiar voices rang out through the forest. "Get away from Gaara!"

Naruto was still too tired from his fight and wasn't able to fully dodge the incoming shurikens, but it turned out he didn't have to anyway. A Kage Heki (Shadow Barrier) suddenly erupted directly in front of Naruto, deflecting the shurikens away before dissolving once again, leaving Naruto to blink in confusion.

When Temari and Kankuro started rushing at Naruto, Gaara commanded them to stop. "That's enough!" Both siblings immediately froze at the order and gazed at their youngest sibling in surprise. "I quit." Gaara stated calmly to both his sibling's shock. When Temari and Kankuro were just about to heave Gaara up and leave the vicinity, a new voice rang out from behind them, stilling their movement.

"Gaara of the Sand. I have a proposition for you." Kaga stated impassively as his eyes roamed over the injuries of the Sand siblings and the Uzumaki heir.

End.

(1) I've renamed the technique that Shikamaru used against Temari to this new version – the Kageho or Shadow Walk. It's the first step of the Kage Michi, so I wasn't lying before, I just gave it a new name.

(2) Here's a hint as to why even the great Uzumaki clan bow down to the Council Seven. Each of the council seven have their own unique ability that even the Uzumaki prophet won't be able to go against. Within the hierarchy of the Hidden Air Village, the Council Seven shares the same status as a governing position as the Uzumaki Prophet. As such, the Council Seven have the authority to rule over the Uzumaki Prophet's decisions and engagements since they have more people (majority rules thing). Yes, most internal and external affairs are all governed by the Uzumaki Prophet house, but the inner workings of the Uzumaki family itself is governed by the Council Seven. Basically, it's you watch my back I watch yours... literary.

(3) & (4) Um... My anime episode (78) for this particular scene was subbed by 'Bakasan', so these translations are from the site "Naruto Ex" and there might be some inconsistencies with other translations. So yeah, please don't mind the actual translation for these comments.

(5) Original Jutsu for Kaga-san!!! This is the third stage in the Kage Michi. If anyone knows of the anime series/manga 'X' or has seen it, this jutsu is basically a copy of the Seven Seal's Technique – the Kekai.

(6) Gama Bunta doesn't treat Naruto as his subordinate but he doesn't treat him as his boss either. They have a seemingly mutual respect for one another, not to mention, they've known each other for such a long time (Naruto first summoned Gama Bunta at the age of 9, just before he met Elle). And if anyone's wondering, Naruto practiced summoning the toads during his one month training period so he knows exactly how much amount of Chakra is used to summon which toad.

Chapter 19

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Nineteen: Aftermath

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

HikaruOfArrow, hyuugaman, stoictimer, RuByMoOn17, black, swtjemz, Crystal-Chan2, :), Sierra-Falls, Eadha Ohn, Dragon Noir, hmr, Gopu, LaZySnAke, xero-ghost, nonengel, Dragon Sheinto, Toki Mirage, Inu-chan613, Daniel of Lorient, Long Shot, blazer6, anonymous, Winged Knight, clicke, Night-Owl123: Thank you all so much for your support and encouragements. It's reviews such as yours that really make my day and help me get over flames (such as the ones I've recently receive) and continue on with my work. This story doesn't just belong to me, it belongs to my fans as well – which means, it belongs to all of you.

Dragon Man 180: Yes, I do favour NarutoXHinata more than any other pairing and I will be starting to develop that relationship during the 2nd Arc of the story, which is coming up real soon. Please be patient.

Hikariko: Arigato for your support! I'm really glad I have such dedicated fans such as yourself that would stand up to bullies like these flammers. I don't blame them for their own opinions, but verbally abusing other people's work is one of the lowest things people can do. It's just not right. I agree with you whole heartedly – if you don't like it, don't read it.

OpposingForce: Thank you so much for your support and encouragement. I agree with you – she is a sabotaging nuisance and I just can't be bothered with such close-minded people that can do nothing else except verbally butcher other people's work. (Shrug) I really don't care what she does in her own time and am not bothered by her outburst at all. Anyway, on with the story! I DO PROMISE not to make Naruto beg... too much... There will be times later on in the story where he will have to find a way to convince others to do what he wants them to – either through direct orders, manipulation, and or... you guessed it... a bit of pleading (side note of manipulation). But only a FEW, I'll do my very best to keep it to a minimum. My Naruto isn't as powerful as most think he is and even if he takes things rather seriously, he knows what type of situation calls for what type of behaviour.

Insanityv2: yes, I do have a muse... it's just been rather erratic these days. Orochimaru probably wouldn't go directly against an Air nin, but that doesn't mean that he can't find one to join him. The Air village is a very small village, many of it's original members have actually left the village itself (either through banishment or forced to flee for their lives) and as such Orochimaru would be able to recruit some of those deserters into his own army. You guessed right, it is the sealing of Shukaku. Yes, the governmental system of the Air village was originally inspired by real life – I always thought that having one person ruling over so many people is too dangerous, but at the same time, having a council that never changes is also dangerous. Wow... I've never thought about coming up with my own Taijutsu styles before... it's just so much easier creating Ninjutsu instead.

Maleficus-lupus: I'm glad you liked Mel and Christy-sama's fics. They're great authors on Gundam Wing. I know I've sent you an email on the matter, but just in case you didn't receive it... I recommend you read of the GW stories by Sunhawk (Ion series and Road Trip series), Ashkara (Genesis – is a must see), Daimeryan Rei and Jei. They're really some of the best authors out there.

Hitomi No Ryu: I just have to take the time to thank you once again for your contributions for the Chuunin Exam Participants, I've got most of them drawn up already and will be sending out pictures and asking for feedback, so I'll be emailing you soon. Anyway, there's a reason behind the declining Uzumaki line even though they are one of the most powerful lines in the Kuunoki. In fact, most of the clans inside the Air village are declining steadily.

Hibiki54 and Ayame K.: Don't like it. Don't read it. And most of all, don't bother complaining to me, I don't have the time to spend on flamers such as yourselves.

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. From now on, I will be starting to use 'Kuunoki' instead of 'Air' all the time. Hope you all could get use to the change. Um. Most of this chapter will be talking, hope you don't mind.

means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

... Author's interruption

... Flashback scenes

Chapter 19

FLASHBACK

"Gaara of the Sand. I have a proposition for you." Kaga stated impassively as his eyes roamed over the injuries of the Sand siblings and the Uzumaki heir.

END FLASHBACK

"Kaga-san... What are you doing now? I can understand you're here because you're my support and you helped create that Kage no Kekai (Shadow Prison)... But what more reason is there for you to come out?" Naruto asked, completely confused as to why the Shadow Master would involve himself even more than he already had. After all, it was against the rules of the Kuunoki no Sato (Hidden Air Village) to get involved in outside conflicts.

Kaga ignored Naruto's questions (to the blonde boy's annoyance) and only kept his eyes on Gaara. "I ask you again, Gaara of the Sand. I have a proposition for you."

Still leaning heavily on his brother's arm, Gaara gave Kaga a deadly glare. "Who are you?" He grunted out in suppressed anger.

Kaga blinked in surprise but then bowed low as a sign of his regretful actions. "Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. I am Kaga of the Kuunoki and I'm here under the orders of my mistress, the Lady Oracle, with an offer to grant you, Gaara of the sand." Straightening himself from his bowing position, Kaga lifted an eyebrow in waiting.

"I don't know you." Gaara snarled in response, basically meaning 'I don't trust you.'

"The Kuunoki no Sato (Hidden Air Village) is impartial to the conflicts of the world. If you choose to come with us, we will guarantee you safe passage within and through out the Fire country. If you were to decide to flee on your own, you may be hunted down by Konoha Shinobis after your head." Kaga answered calmly, shrugging his shoulders as if the fact didn't disturb him at all. "However, that is not the proposition I have for you." Looking straight into Gaara's piercing green eyes, Kaga continued to bait the boy. "Would you like to know what I'm offering you, carrier of Shukaku?"

Gaara narrowed his eyes in fury but knew that he was in no condition to fight. "Not interested." Gaara growled low, like a wild animal waiting to pounce on its prey.

"We are offering you a chance to seal the demon away once and for all. We are offering you a chance to become normal, to be able to sleep a full night's sleep without any nightmares. We are offering you the freedom from your destiny, Gaara of the Sand." In one long breath of voice, Kaga had laid out all their trump cards; he knew the Tanuki boy could not possibly resist. "What say you, to this agreement? Come with me to see the Lady Oracle and we shall discuss this matter further."

There was a long moment of silence as everyone took some time to swallow the information that Kaga had just dumped on them. Naruto was quiet because he was completely shocked at what Kaga was offering. To him, he just couldn't believe that his Aunt had even thought of the idea. For a Kuunoki Shinobi, getting involved in outside affairs is punishable by death or life imprisonment. That was how harsh they take their laws.

For Gaara, he was just stunned at what this strange man was offering. Could this 'Lady Oracle' be a fake? Maybe she just wants what all the other people want, my death... But if it was real... then... then I have a chance to be rid of Shukaku forever... couldn't I? I... I don't know what to do... The confused and emotionally unstable boy thought frantically over his choices. He could accept and take the chances that this wasn't all just a joke, or he could walk away from it completely. And perhaps regret for the rest of his life.

Temari and Kankuro, on the hand, were completely suspicious of Kaga's seemingly 'too-good-to-be-real' offer. Narrowing his eyes, Kankuro growled: "What's the catch?"

Kaga blinked innocently at him in return. "The 'catch' as you say, is between the Lady Oracle herself and Gaara-san. I am in no position to either make any demands or negotiate the terms and conditions. I am simply a messenger, here to serve my Lady." Kaga raised both his hands in a sign of peace and surrender, showing that he meant no harm, nor did he hold any judgement over the matter.

Though still suspicious of Kaga's supposed integrity, both Temari and Kankuro turned to Gaara to make the final decision. Gaara took a long time to come to a decision but none the less, a final decision was made. "I will come." He paused for a moment before narrowing his eyes. "But if I am unsatisfied with the deal. I will kill you." He said coldly, as if stating a fact instead of just being a threat.

Naruto continued to stay silent and watch the interaction between the Shadow Master and the Sound siblings. Considering Kaga-san still hadn't responded to his earlier queries, he knew that he wouldn't get any answers until the man was ready to tell them. Which basically meant that everyone would be taking a visit to see his Aunt in the near future, if not right at that instant.

As he predicted, Kaga-san followed Gaara's decision with a bow of respect before activating his Kage Heki (Shadow Barrier), surrounding the immediately area around all the remaining members in the forest – namely – Gaara, Naruto, Temari Kankuro and Kaga-san himself. Once everyone was included inside the Kage Heki, it was a simply matter of teleporting all of them using the Kageho (Shadow Walk) to where the Lady Oracle currently resided.

Naruto blinked at the sudden change of environment, but was nowhere as surprised by the teleportation as Gaara and his siblings. Kankuro was currently waving around his arms madly in suppressed panic while Temari had her fan open and ready for any attack. Gaara simply stood in between them, with one raised eyebrow as the only sign of his surprise.

"There is no need to be afraid, Gaara-san, Temari-san and Kankuro-san. This building is under the protection of the Kuunoki's law of impartiality to all outside conflicts. We are neither friend nor foe of either the Hidden sand or the Hidden Leaf. Not to mention, the building itself is also enclosed within one of my Kage no Kekai (Shadow Prison), protecting it from all outside interference." Kaga-san explained patiently. Gaara and his siblings relaxed slightly but did not completely let go of their anxieties.

"The Lady Oracle is waiting for you behind that door." Kaga indicated the sliding doors in front of them as the one they should be going through.

Seeing that none of the Sand Shinobis wanted to be the first to enter, Naruto took the responsibilities upon his own shoulders and stepped forward to be the first. He paused slightly when his hand touched the handle of the door, but he quickly slid it open before his mind could tell him to hesitate or give him any further doubts.

Once the door had been slid widely open, Naruto and the others behind him gapped at the display of the room itself. It was a completely empty room, with no furnitures or carpet, illuminated only by several candles attached to candle stands on the walls. Upon the centre of the empty room sat the Lady Oracle in an Indian style. However, unlike the high and mighty pose she'd like to present, Uzumaki Ruri was looking vaguely pale and sickly, her brow sprinkled with sweat and her body tense in almost exhaustion. This was the first time Naruto had ever seen his Aunt showing any weakness, and it scared him more than he'd like to admit.

The second most important feature in the room that had caught all of their attentions were the multiple intricate designs of geometric shapes and characters carved deeply onto the floor, roof and the three walls that surround them (excluding the one with the door that they had just walked through). (1) The designs consisted of two large circles, one placed within the other, 4 lines directly across its centre divided the two circles into 8 equal sections. There are 2 squares present within the circles, a large one whose vertices connect with the very intersection of the inner circle and 2 of it's lines of symmetry, while the second square, smaller in size, is formed by linking the lines at points where the first square crosses the other 2 lines of symmetry. Within the inner-square is a smaller octagon is displayed, crossed with a giant five-pointed star. The giant start is surrounded by four of its smaller counter parts that cross 2 of the circle's lines of symmetry. As strange as the geometric symbol itself may seem,

what was even more unique about it were the Sanskrit characters written in blood on the area between the two circles.

Naruto blinked at the embezzled image, acknowledging that it was similar to the one his Aunt had cast upon him just before his Chuunin exam in which she had sealed away his use of the Tenkun no buki. But this new version of the same idea was far more complicated than the previous.

"This is the Go Hoshi Fuuin no Jutsu. (Five Star Sealing System)" The Lady Oracle finally decided to voice out some explanation, slicing across the silence that had surrounded the once empty room. "It is a special blood seal that was used to capture, manipulate and or seal demons in the days long past. This will be the first time a Uzumaki would be forced to use such a seal in over 500 years."

Naruto blinked out of his stupor. The explanation was spoken with such an offhand and casual tone of voice that the Lady Oracle almost seemed as if she didn't care that she was about to undergo a sealing ritual that hadn't been performed in a few hundred years. Though Naruto was hard pressed in collecting all of his scattered thoughts together to form any coherent thought patterns, the first thing that left his mouth was: "Is it safe?" Taken back by his own abrupt question, Naruto mentally chastised himself for even doubting his powerful Aunt.

"On the contrary, this is a very dangerous technique. Lots of people have died of blood loss after performing it." Ruri then shrugged her shoulders as if implying that there was nothing else to do *but* accept the consequences. Naruto continued to gap at his Aunt, unsure of why his heart was constricting painfully at the thought of her dieing anytime soon and leaving him behind.

"What are you planning on doing with that... seal?" Gaara finally mumbled in a calm tone of voice, though he was feeling anything but calm at the moment. He could sense the demon within him stirring in nervousness, as if it was afraid of the young woman sitting in front of him.

"Ah. You must be Gaara." The Lady Oracle shifted her gaze from Naruto to the red haired boy; her eyes - though slightly tired looking, still pierced through his very soul and looked over his inner thoughts. Gaara fought to keep down a shudder. She's strong... Stronger than me... Gaara thought to himself as he suddenly felt small and alone in the face of this mature and yet unknown woman.

"Do you know anything about the Shukaku, Gaara? Do any of you know the history behind how the Shukaku came to be?" Ruri asked innocently, curious as to their answers. Even though she was an oracle and a very wise person overall, she was not a mind reader.

Temari and Kankuro gave each other strange looks before turning their attention to Gaara's questioning gaze and shrugged, acknowledging that they didn't know much either. "The knowledge over the demon Shukaku is one of Sand's most well kept secrets." Narrowing his eyes, Gaara continued. "We are not at liberty to say."

Ruri shrugged again. "Which means that you guys don't know much at all about it, do you?" She asked in a mocking tone of voice.

Both Temari and Kankuro flinched and Gaara twitched an eyebrow. "We know that it was sealed inside a teakettle a long time ago. It was the living soul of an ancient high priest in the Hidden Village of the Sand." Gaara snarled, angry that this stranger dared to mock his intelligence.

The Lady Oracle gave the three a sadistic smirk, which led them to feel shivers up their spines at her icy gaze. "Almost 8 hundred years ago, there was a man living in the Hidden Sand village. For his knowledge in Jutsus and Chakra manipulation, he was renowned as a high priest by the many Shinobis living there at the time." She started her story, in a calm and impassive voice. "What they did not know, was that this man, he was actually a refugee, fleeing from the Hidden Air village for his supposed lack of talent and unethical practices."

Pausing to let that information sink in, Ruri continued with her story. "He had always lusted for power, fame and acknowledgement. But in the Hidden Air village - where talent and skill is ranked far higher than social status, his less than average abilities had made him less than popular. As such, he pursued a deviant course of study, which eventually led to his banishment from our village. He travelled to the Hidden Sand village, where he was finally acknowledged for his skill and wisdom. However, he was not satisfied with simply power and fame. He wanted vengeance on the village that did not recognize him, on the people who had looked down upon him. He pursued the same course of study he had originally abandoned years ago – the creation of another Tenkun no Buki."

Here, Naruto audibly gasped in shock. His eyes widened to a substantial amount at the insinuation of yet another Tenkun no buki being created. Ruri ignored his plight and continued with the story. "For those of you who do not know of the Tenkun no Buki. They are the heavenly weapons used by man to push back the domain of demons in an age where demons rule the world. They were created by trapping a real demon and imprisoning it into a workable object; only to be used by humans against their own kind." She paused once again to wet her dry lips.

"That man had successfully summoned forth and captured a demon from the abyss – the Shukaku – an A-class sand demon of the Tanuki kind." Ruri narrowed her eyes in suppressed anger. "However, he was unsuccessful in binding the demon's spirit to any object. His mistake in tampering with the demons resulted in his soul being consumed by the very demon he summoned forth and the eventual merging of the two spirits. You see, Gaara-san. A real demon is ultimately untameable, and will have no knowledge of so-called 'Jutsus' used by man. Their powers are as wild as the wind and cannot be controlled in the way humans do with their Charka. As such, the failed experimentation which led to the High Priest of the Sand merging with the original Shukaku demon created a new being of existence."

"The creature that now resides in you, Gaara-san, is a combined entity of a human soul and a demon's power. That is why the later Sand Shinobis were finally able to seal the newly formed Shukaku into a teakettle to begin with. It was newly born, and was confused and unable to control much of itself. But in its confusion, it had already destroyed half the Sand Village in a fit of rage. The original bloodlust of a demon had been strengthened by the man's emotions, desires and dreams. He had always wanted to kill those who had belittled him, and through this merging, the new Shukaku – one who is obsessed with destruction, pain and blood – is born." Ruri concluded. A long silence ensued, letting them all have time to consume the information she had just dumped on them.

Finally, Gaara asked in a quiet and almost pleading voice. "I was a mistake?"

"No. Shukaku was mistake, unintentionally created by a man's greed for power and vengeance. Your possession by Shukaku was a mistake, but of your fathers, not you. That does not mean that you, yourself, are a mistake to humanity." The Lady Oracle explained calmly, without any emotion in her voice.

Temari was unable to hide her anger and confusion at the version of stories told by the Lady Oracle and that of the stories they had heard since they were young. "That's a whole load of Bll Sht! I don't believe you! Our father is the great Kazekage of the Hidden Sand village! I won't allow you to say any snide comments about him. Not only that, the high priest of the Hidden sand saved us from destruction, he sacrificed his life to seal the demon into the teakettle!" Temari screamed at the impassively watching women.

"Is that what your official records say?" Ruri asked calmly. Temari looked away, knowing that the stories were only spread through word of mouth. Silence reigned through out the room for a while. The Lady Oracle sat back on her hunches, her eyes glazed slightly as she thought over what Temari had just exclaimed. Finally, she came to a decision. "Believe what you will, Temari-san. But when you return to the Hidden Sand village, go to the National Library of

ancient arts. Once there, look up some of the forbidden scrolls of official records, you will have your answers then." Temari continued to look away, unable to accept the truth that what she had believed in was all a lie.

Deciding to change the entire atmosphere of the room, the Lady Oracle interrupted everyone's thoughts by completely changing the subject of discussion. "Anyway. Let's move on to what I want from you, Gaara-san." Ruri looked straight at Gaara with a piercing gaze.

Gaara calmly stared back, refusing to back down in fear or challenge. "And what is that?"

The Lady Oracle smiled, not a smirk, a genuine smile. "With the 5 Star Sealing system, I can help you be rid of the Shukaku but leave you with most of its original powers. In return, I want you to swear an oath of obedience to me. What I mean is that I want you to become a servant of mine, serving me as I so wish until I set you free to do as you like."

Gaara narrowed his eyes in fury. "My life is what I make it. No one can control me."

"And what kind of life is that, Gaara-san?" The Lady Oracle immediately refuted back. "One where you decides who lives and who dies. A life where you won't even be able to enjoy a full night's sleep without being plagued by nightmares. One where you are constantly hunted down by your own people because they fear you will one day turn on them and set the demon free. Tell me, Gaara-san. Is that any kind of life to live? Are you really willing to follow the same path when you have a chance to change all that?" Ruri argued.

Gaara remained silent. "I'm not saying you will become my slave indefinitely. In fact, you'll probably only follow my orders for one year at the most. All I'm asking is that you see me as your superior, someone you respect and listen to, someone you can look up to."

Ruri ended her argument with this conclusion, leaving the red haired boy to decide for himself what his future should be.

Suddenly, her attention was brought back to her nephew as Naruto asked a question of his own. "This seal... It is different from my own?" He asked, curious as to the difference of the two.

The Lady Oracle nodded; glad to have someone change the subject. "Yes, the extra seal I placed on top of the Hakke no Fuuin Shiki (Eight Divination Sealing Method) and the Shishou Fuuin (Four Elephant or Image Seal) (2) originally created by the Fourth Hokage is the Niju Bunri Fuuin no Jutsu (Double Separation Sealing technique). While the one I'll be using on Gaara is the Gohoshi Fuuin no Jutsu (Five Star Sealing System)."

She paused slightly before going into the lecture mode she likes to display when explaining anything to her nephew. "The five star sealing system is more powerful because it is a celestial system that uses the alignment of the stars and the natural energy flows to accurately contain a demon into whatever it is being sealed into without giving the demon itself any freedom to fight back. It is also the same system used in the first stage of creating most of the Tenkun no Bukis. A system that can only be used by the Uzumakis and one that same man – the High Priest of Sand – could never hope to achieve."

"What's so great about the so-called Uzumaki? How come only someone from that line can do this stupid seal? I don't get it? Isn't that brat a Uzumaki?" Surprisingly, it was the irritating voice of Kankuro that interrupted the negotiations.

The Lady Oracle gave him a cruel smirk, which made the boy shift nervously and mentally berating himself, but after a while, she did decide to answer. "The Uzumaki clan is one of the oldest (if not oldest) clans in the world. We are responsible for creating the Tenkun no Bukis and the eventual ridding of demons upon the land of the Ningenkai. The Uzumaki family is also traditionally the ruling family of the Hidden Air village. And that 'brat' as you'd like to call him

is my nephew and heir to the Kuunoki (Air)." She replied snidely, rather annoyed at the boy's rude interruption.

Watching the black clad boy squirm under her scrutiny, Ruri released a satisfied smirk on to her face. "And anyway, this blood seal was created by the Uzumaki for the Uzumaki. As a common rule, if a curse is created by blood, then it can only be destroyed by blood. (3) The Gohoshi Fuuin was specifically formulated using the Uzumaki blood and DNA template as a foundation, mainly because we are able to manipulate our blood to change it's properties and molecular structure at will." (4)

Ignoring the ongoing argument between Ruri and Kankuro, Naruto slumped his shoulders as he thought about the supposed deal between Gaara and his Aunt, knowing that there was probably something concerning him too. Interrupted the two, Naruto asked: "And what of me, Lady? What am I doing here?"

Ruri shifted her attention from Kankuro to Naruto. "First and foremost, if you are to help me complete this seal then you must acknowledge your heritage." Naruto visibly cringed at that sentence. "This means that you will have to physically sign the contract with your own blood and agree to the conditions that will be bestowed upon you as the next Uzumaki heir." Naruto tightened his slightly shaking fist in anger. "And of course... the loss of your freedom is inevitable. It is your decision to make, Naruto."

"And what if I refuse..." Already guessing at the answer, Naruto shut his eyes tightly knowing what was to come.

"Then the Uzumaki line will come to an end with me as the last of the Prophets. I will probably die sealing the Shukaku." Ruri answered grimly but without lying about the consequences.

I DON'T WANT YOU TO DIE!!! Naruto screamed inside his mind as he fought for control over his emotions. You are... you've become... You know you've already become... one of my... precious persons... You're my family... my only family. Naruto concluded to himself.

Opening his eyes and looking at his Aunt with a sad expression, Naruto nodded in acceptance. "I understand. I will take the oath of prophecy."

The Lady Oracle gave a small sigh of relief and sadness, lifting her hand and directing it at Naruto, she started chanting to herself. "Uum ca na ta ra mu te chi ku ru oi..." As she chanted, a strange vortex started appearing in front of Naruto, and from it, a very large scroll slowly rose out of it. (5) Once it had completely emerged from the vortex, the ancient but thick scroll started unravelling itself. Naruto watched impassively as hundreds of names scrolled across the long piece of cloth (for the scroll was created by cloth, not paper), unfolding itself from one end and yet refolding itself on the other to save space. These were the names of his ancestors, the names of all the Uzumaki prophets that had ever taken up the position of looking after both the Tenkun no buki and the Kuunoki no Sato. This was also, ultimately, his destiny and his demise.

Finally, coming to a stop at the very end of the scroll itself, Naruto read over the two names written directly before the sole empty space left on the scroll. How depressing, I really am the last... He thought to himself. The first name before his own was 'Uzumaki Ruri', the tiny handprint below her signature tore at Naruto's heart. He had heard from Kaga-san that Ruri signed this very same contract at the mere age of three. How she was able to write in such neat scripts at that age was a mystery to Naruto.

And before hers was the name of his great uncle, a man who started changing the ways of the Kuunoki but was later stripped of his power and banished from his home after his sister's death (Ruri's mother and Naruto's grandmother). The name 'Uzumaki Tenka' proudly written in a neat script was placed next to Ruri's, his hand prints too, were small in comparison to Naruto's own. Probably around five or six years old Naruto guessed, feeling very depressed suddenly. How could they do this to mere children? He asked himself, but no answers were forthcoming. There simply were no answers to be found, even from a prophet's point of view.

Can I really do this? He asked himself again. I'll be giving up my dream of becoming Hokage. I'll be giving up the freedom to be me. I'll become nothing but the shadow of my forefathers, forever following the laws set up by the ancients, sealing myself within the cage of destiny... I once told Neji that I believed destiny could be defied... Now I must have faith in myself and Aunt Ruri – I hope that we will find a way... a way to escape the curse... a way to be free.

Naruto shook away his rambling thoughts, and before he could hesitate any further, he quickly bit his thumb. Naruto scrolled his own name down on the only space reserved for him at the end of the scroll itself, before finally dabbing all his fingers with his still bleeding thumb and finishing the contract off with his signature handprint. As his hand left the surface of the scroll, Naruto felt a hot flash on top of his forehead. Once the pain had gone, Naruto realised that this was the beginning of his path as a prophet. He knew that underneath his Kuunoki head protector now resides the mark of the Uzumaki heir – a single red dot (6), the first stage in becoming the next ruling prophet. With the transformation over and done with, the scroll quickly re-rolled itself up, binding its own strings before slowly fading away from existence, its job having already been done.

Now that he had literally signed his death warrant, or in a sense, a warrant that dictated the rest of his life, Naruto tried to remember why he had signed it in the first place. Looking straight in the eye of his Aunt, Naruto blinked out of his daze. "How can I help? Now that I'm the official Uzumaki heir." He asked, still emotionally unstable at having just written off the rest of his life.

Ruri nodded and started her explanations. "You can help me with the sealing Jutsu itself. It is forbidden for anyone other than an Uzumaki to participate in this sealing Jutsu, as it requires our special Uzumaki blood to activate it in the first place. After the sealing is done, if you are able, please give me a blood transfusion too." Naruto's eyes widened at the implication of what his Aunt had just said. A blood transfusion! That means the person who is going to activate the ritual

loses a lot of blood! He worried mentally over his Aunt's health and well being.

Looking over the Lady Oracle's firm and resigned face, Naruto felt his heart constrict again. It was then that he made a silent vow to himself. I will defy destiny! I have to! I'll find a way to set you free, Aunt Ruri! If it's the last thing I'll do, I'll find a way for the both of us to escape the clutches of the Council Seven and the responsibility over the Tenkun no Buki! I swear I will! His tightened fist shook with determination.

Suddenly brought out of his musings, Naruto looked up as Gaara interrupted everyone's thoughts with his own decision. "I... I accept." He simply stated, with an undertone of nervousness.

Temari and Kankuro's eyes widened in shock, neither of them had actually believed that their brother would take such a huge chance, such a large leap in faith. "Gaara! Are you sure?! This could be a trap!!" Temari tried to reason with him.

"What about father? What if he disagrees? What if we're caught afterwards by the other Sand Officials? We're gonna get punished for sure!" Kankuro argued, suddenly panicking about what would happen to all of them when they finally did return to their homeland.

"Your father, the Kazekage is already dead." An icy silence rang through out the room following this proclamation. "He was a misguided fool that underestimated the treachery of Orochimaru. He was killed by the Snake almost four days ago." The Lady Oracle completed her sentence with a very tight-lipped expression.

"It can't be..." Temari whispered. It's true that their father had never really taken any time to get to know them, and was especially cruel to Gaara. He was always busy with the welfare of the village, and with their mother's death during Gaara's birth; he had become an even colder man than before. But none the less, he was their father, Temari had to respect him as the sire of herself and her brothers. The cold shock that had immobilised her continued to freeze her

limbs and heart. She was simply unable to swallow this harsh truth. The fact that one of most powerful men in the Sand village had simply disappeared from her life, it was a shocking and numbing experience.

Kankuro, on the other hand, was not numb with shock like Temari; he was angry, furious. "YOU LIE!!!" He snarled with all the built up irritation and agitation since the entire debacle during the Chuunin Exam. He couldn't believe it, he wouldn't believe it; he just could not accept it as truth.

The Lady Oracle sighed, tired of dealing with such immature children. "Believe what you will!" She snapped. "But his body, as well as two of his subordinates, will be found a day from now. And then, the Hidden Sand Village will be put under martial law. After the panicked news of his death get out, compounded by the failed attempt at invading Konoha, the Hidden Sand Village will almost be on the verge of collapse and falling into it's own internal civil war. There are many who are currently thinking of starting their own revolution, overruling your governing council and proclaiming themselves as the next Kazekage. There would be mutiny in the streets... Can you take the chance of *not* heeding my words" She threatened. The grim news never moved Gaara, but Temari and Kankuro had paled suddenly as the depressing news slowly sunk into their muddled minds.

"I accept your terms and conditions. You will grant me the freedom to be rid of the demon Shukaku, and in return, I shall serve you for the time period of one year at most. But know this, if I have other priorities that I must attend to, then I will abandon any services I owe to you in return to complete my own missions." Gaara stated as a matter to fact.

Ruri nodded. "Agreed."

"One question." Gaara asked, seemingly to be the only one who still had a firm control over his emotions then both his siblings. "If and

when my time of services expires, will the seal you give me erode once again?"

Ruri shook her head. "No. The 5 star sealing system is a permanent sealing technique. Once applied, it will last until the time of your death. It will be placed in such a way to separate the demon's spirit with its power. You will be granted almost complete control over the original power of the Sand demon, while Shukaku itself, is locked behind a cage that cannot be re-opened until you die."

Gaara narrowed his eyes. "And what would happen with my death?" He asked, curious and suspicious at the same time.

"Well, for starters. You'd be dead." Ruri shrugged in a casual manner. "And the spirit of Shukaku would be set free from the seal. However, because it's connection to its powers had been sealed away, the spirit itself, would simply flout among itself for the rest of eternity or find a way to reincarnate itself – but that process could take it at least a few hundred years to complete." She paused for a short amount of time to collect her thoughts. "Know this, Gaara of the sand. Anything you do with the power granted to you now is your responsibility. You can no longer hide behind the fact that the demon is influencing your actions. It is all YOU!" She emphasized the point further.

Gaara nodded in agreement. "What is it I must do?" Finally deciding that they have wasted enough time as it is, he wanted to get to the action part immediately.

"Are you absolutely sure about this, Gaara?" Temari asked for the last time, and was met with a very firm expression from her younger brother. Noting the determination in his eyes, she dropped her head, knowing that there was no way for her to change his mind.

The Lady Oracle finally stood up to her feet. Her face having recovered from some of its paleness and sweat from before, she looked slightly rejuvenated. Stepping backwards until she was no longer standing on the carved seal on the floor, she stopped moving

and indicated he should come forward. "Please sit in the centre of the seal, Gaara-san. As for Temari-san and Kankuro-san, for your own safety, please stand back; leaning against the wall would be most appropriate as Kaga can protect you from any of the backlash of power. Naruto, please stand on the other end of the seal. I will need your input in power." She ordered in a no-nonsense tone of voice, while the rest of them moved to their designated placing.

Once everyone was in position, Ruri motioned for Gaara to sit down and told him bluntly that this would hurt a lot. "Because the possession jutsu inflicted on you when you were born was made by sacrificing the body and blood of your mother, that is why your sand carries the smell of blood, not only of your victims of also of your mother's death. As such, I will have to embed my own blood into your sand, force the spirit of Shukaku out of the sand particles and strip you of your power for a short amount of time. It will hurt like I'm skinning you alive. Is that understandable?" Ruri warned for the last time. Gaara simply snorted in response, demonstrating that he already knew pain was inevitable.

"Naruto." The Lady Oracle called out as both Naruto and herself had sat down on opposite ends of the central design, with Gaara sitting Indian style right in the middle. "Summon forth your Yochigan and you will be able to follow through with everything that you need to do. It will teach you far quicker than I could." She ordered in a commanding voice.

Naruto gulped in nervousness. He had really only succeeded in activating and successfully controlling the Yochigan once during his week of training. Most of the time was spent on practicing the Tenshi no Doki, of which he found was much more useful in battle circumstances while the Yochigan was better suited for strategy and planning. However, that did not mean that the Yochigan is a weak asset when it comes to a combat situation, in fact, it is quite an advantage having known about your opponent's moves even before they make them. However, the biggest disadvantage lies in the fact

that the Yochigan CANNOT last for a long time, a few seconds is the limit for Naruto.

Taking a deep breath and preparing himself for the onslaught of image, Naruto placed his hands together in a single seal and concentrated with all his might. Almost instantly, he could feel the strange tingle of his bloodline limit ability activating. A hot flash of heat surged through his body being the only warning he got before his mind was bombarded with images from beyond time itself. He could see the multitude of hand seals that he would be performing in a matter of minutes afterwards flash through his mind in a rapid pace, as if someone was playing the tape in 'fast-forward' mode. He could also distinctively hear the words of the chant that he was to perform, mixed in with his Aunt's words at the exact same time. He could visualise Gaara screaming in pain as he clutched onto his throbbing head in agony. He could see the sand move and react against the seals. An unholy scream, unlike any that could be created through a human voice box rang through out Naruto's mind before he finally deactivated the Yochigan.

Heaving in deep breaths of air, Naruto could feel his body shudder in tension as the aftershocks and stress created by using the Yochigan ran through its course. He could feel the eerie sensation of his own blood rolling down his cheeks, escaping from his very eyes, eyes that hadn't been opened since the activation of the Yochigan in the first place. After a few minutes of mentally and physically calming himself down, Naruto nodded resolutely in the direction that he remembered his Aunt was facing.

As if there was an invisible single, both Uzumaki mistress and apprentice suddenly launched themselves into the complicated set of hand seals, followed up by the strange chant of words and charms in the ancient tongue which coincides with the sealing ritual. To them, the entire world had blackened leaving them with the single, most important act of summoning forth this technique. No one else mattered - nothing else mattered.

As if far away, both could hear Gaara start screaming in agony but both had decided that what they were doing currently was more important than anything else. Their emotions drifted away, leaving only a blank façade and a single mindedness to complete the task at hand, helped by the ancient knowledge of how to perform said task burning through their veins. The ritual must continue now that it has begun, nothing and no one can stop them.

Outside of Ruri and Naruto's inner minds, Kankuro and Temari both cringed as Gaara released another throat ripping scream. The red haired boy had rolled over himself several times over the now shimmering and shining seal on the ground, clutching his head in undescribed pain. All the carved seal and the bloodied words on the ground on the ground, all three walls and roof had instantly activated when Naruto and Ruri started chanting. The seals started to glow in an unnatural blue colour, slowly brightening itself until it was almost a blinding white light, shimmering and merging with other colours of the rainbow, as if an aurora borealis was currently being reflected all around the room. It was beautiful and yet it was terrifying at the same time.

Kankuro and Temari could both feel the power being consumed into this very technique, the large amount of Chakra being released by the Lady Oracle followed by her apprentice heated the room, raising its temperature several degrees in height. Not only that, the blood that had originally flowed within the carved seal on the ground now moved on its own, clutching onto Gaara's very being as if it was alive and had a mind of its own. It reached and stuck itself all over Gaara's body while his sand gourd was left discarded on the inner edge of the inside circle, almost completely covered in the newly introduced Uzumaki blood.

All of a sudden, both Ruri and Naruto stopped chanted and released their hands from the completed seals, followed up by retrieving a Kunai in their right hand from somewhere hidden away in their body's clothes. Both of them then continued by slashing their left

hand, creating a rather deep cut, releasing a lot of blood flow. Following the same patter, they created another deep cut into the palm of their right hand by switching the blade from one hand to the next. Finally dropping the Kunai to their sides after both their hands had been bloodied, they slammed their exposed palms directly onto the carved seal right in front of them. (7) The reaction was instantaneous.

The bright white light that once surrounded the seal turned instantly red in colour. Gaara released an ear-piercing scream while his body contorted in pain followed by a violent spasming effect. His now blood covered gourd of sand suddenly burst into its particle form, just as all the sand particles that had been used by Gaara to fuel his 'Suna no Yoroi' (Armour of Sand) started sliding off the now unconscious boy and floated upwards in mid air. The massive swarm of sand particles covering the very space of the room swerved in its own right, hovering whenever it please only to be followed by an unexpected twist in action or a sudden sped in speed. As if having a mind of its own, the sand experimented, trying to escape every corner of its surrounding seals like an invisible square cage, but to no avail. After a short time of trial and error, it seemed the 'sand' finally grew frustrated at being caged. It roared an inhuman screech that sounded like a cross between the thunder and a lion.

Temari and Kankuro huddled together tightly, completely frightened by the display of that... that... sand thing. "What the hell is that thing?" Kankuro shivered as he felt the familiar sensation of blood lust and the desire to kill.

Kaga answered calmly from beside that. "That... is the true form of Shukaku."

It was at that moment that the Sand demon decided to manifest itself. The mass of sand particles gathered together like a swarm of bees, fitting into an intricate pattern of interlocking molecules, finally forming the giant head of Shukaku floating above a swirling of sand waves, all surrounding the now unmoving form of Gaara. (8)

"SSSSSSET ME FREEEEEEEE!!!!!!!" It hissed in rage, determined to intimidate the measly humans into stopping.

Both Temari and Kankuro cowered as the familiar voice of Shukaku echoed through out the room. However, to their surprise, both the Uzumakis ignored the demons demand and continued with their sealing ceremony. Lifting their now dirtied hands together in a slight prayer, both Ruri and Naruto started to chant again, in a harmonious and singsong type of tune. It was a strange and yet awe-inspiring sound, as if the earth itself was humming along with the chanting. But the atmosphere was abruptly broken when Shukaku screeched in high-pitched fury and pain. Temari and Kankuro watched with wide eyes and pale faces as the head of Shukaku dissipated into agitated sand particles that tried to escape its invisible cubed cage by slamming itself against the walls with all its might, all to no avail.

Long minutes stretched on and on to both Temari and Kankuro, but gradually, the floating masses of sand smashing itself against the invisible seal had slowed, with less and less sand being manipulated by Shukaku in its desperate race to escape. Slowly but surely, the sand demon was being trapped, the influence of its power sucked away from it, draining it from its very life source until finally, all of Gaara's sand lay unmoving onto the floor and no other sound can be heard since both Ruri and Naruto's chanting had stopped several minutes prior.

Everyone stayed as silent as possible, afraid to be the first to break the spell, unable to find the courage to test if it was all a dream or not. It took Ruri's sudden vomit of blood that finally shook everyone out of his or her own shocked paralysis. Kaga and Naruto immediately rushed towards Ruri (Naruto having recovered from the side effects of the Yochigan some minutes ago as well) and carted her off out the only door and into the next room, leaving the three sand siblings alone to their thoughts.

Temari released a deep breath of air that she hadn't noticed she's been holding. Shakily, she let go of Kankuro and made her way slowly towards her other brother, scared that he might have died.

With a slightly shivering hand, Temari placed her pale fingers against Gaara's neck, once again holding her breath in anticipation, only to be flooded with relief when she felt Gaara's strong and normal pulse. Looking back at her still frozen brother in the black suit, she gave him a happy smile, indicating that Gaara really is fine. When she finally looked back, she was shocked at seeing Gaara's green eyes open and looking back at her curiously.

Removing her hand (that was still next to his neck) slowly out of fear, Temari was caught in surprise when her wrist was caught in the firm grip of Gaara. Looking straight into her slightly nervous eyes, Gaara whispered in a soft and raw voice. "Is it over?"

Temari nodded hesitantly in reply, only to be further shocked by the small smile now displayed on Gaara's face. The smile was sweet and yet filled with so much relief and regret that it was hard to tell whether Gaara was feeling happy or sad. "I'm glad." Struggling against falling asleep, Gaara mustered enough energy to reply one last time, shocking both his siblings completely. "Arigato... for supporting me... all this time... Temari... Kankuro." That was all that the red haired boy said before he drifted off to sleep again.

The tension in Temari's shoulders slowly slipped away, leaving her emotionally exhausted next to her physically exhausted brother. Sensing her other brother's presence suddenly behind her, Temari turned around and looked at him in the eye, a nervous smile was shared, a silent question asked with no answers to be found. 'So what now?' Kankuro silently asked. 'I don't know... I really don't know...' Temari could only shrug in response.

Several rooms away, Naruto turned to his side and watched his pale-faced Aunt sadly. He wasn't allowed to move too much unless he wished to disrupt the needle and tube attached to his left arm that was being used to transfer blood into his Aunt. Even though they had both performed the same ritual, but because Ruri had taken the lead, she would have used up much more blood than Naruto. Not to mention, Naruto had the Kyuubi inside of him, probably helping him

by producing as much of his body's blood as needed. Having the Kyuubi inside your body really is a bonus at times like these. Naruto thought to himself sarcastically.

Through out all the time he had known his Aunt, Naruto had never ever seen her in such a weakened state. Or at least, she had never allowed him to see her at such a weakened state. He was sure that Kaga must have seen her in such weak states before, since he knew exactly what to do at the exact time.

Kaga had rushed Ruri straight back to her original bedroom, resting her comfortably in her bed, before dragging the blood transfusion machine that he had probably 'borrowed' from the Konoha hospital (without asking) and ordering Naruto to get into a comfortable position. Kaga had not tried to heal his Aunt in the manner that most of the Air Nins would. In fact, Naruto was surprised that Kaga even knew that doing so wouldn't help at all, because the injuries of the Uzumaki can only be healed by either another Uzumaki, or someone from the Dokudes clan.

While Kaga had left saying he had a small errand to run, Naruto had been ordered to continue to watch over his Aunt's vital signs. Running his right hand over the Lady Oracle's cool arm, Naruto felt his heart constrict. I'm such a BABY!!! He mentally scolded himself. Forcing his arm away, Naruto laid back onto his own bed, covering his eyes with his right arm, hoping to force away the tears that threatened to spill.

For a long moment, no sound was emitted through out the room; finally, Naruto thought that he had gathered enough wits to admit his own faults for the first time in a long time. "I'm sorry." He whispered softly, knowing full well that his Aunt probably can't hear him now but would eventually pick up on it since she is an oracle after all. "I've looked up to you and Kaga-san for such a long time... ever since you somehow pulled me out of the darkness within my soul... but sometimes I forget... that you're human too. I'm selfish and conceited, I know, always running away from the truth. Always

looking to you for guidance... I'm such a child." Naruto concluded his soft ramblings on berating himself.

It's the same with every powerful person I've ever met. Jiraiya... I've always expected him to continue to look out for me... so the first time he left me alone... I couldn't handle it... I hate that loneliness... I depend so much on others reaching out to me, that sometimes, I just cover myself in this silent depression. Elle was the first to reach out to me without my permission and I had failed her. Aunt Ruri had reached out to me and dragged me back into reality too... I refuse to lose her too... Naruto thought to himself. I have to stop relying on others to look after me. It's time I stop being a child and start acting like a real Shinobi.

And then, his eyes became more determined. "But I promise you. I'll try to grow up. I'll do my best to live for myself, decide for myself, and take responsibility for my own actions from now on. I'm Uzumaki Naruto, both a Shinobi of the Kuunoki and Konoha, last descendant of two powerful clans. I won't hide from my duties any more. I'll become the next Uzumaki prophet and I'll still make Konoha proud. I promise I won't disappoint you, Kaga-san or my late parents..." With a small smile on his face, Naruto drifted off into sleep, too emotionally exhausted to keep up his duty of looking over his Aunt, and almost completely forgotten about the three Sand siblings resting only several rooms away.

Unnoticed by Naruto, Ruri had her eyes open at the last second of his tired speech. She watched his sleeping form from the corner of her eyes and she gave him a tired smile. He's really growing up, Yuuki. He doesn't know it yet, but he's taken the first steps in defying destiny. You would be so proud of him. She thought, then closed her own eyes and drifted off to sleep herself.

(1) Influence from watching way too much Full Metal Alchemist and other CLAMP animes, like X and Card Captor . I should have uploaded a picture of this design on my Galleries page, please go to my profiles to find the site address.

(2) The 'Hakke no Fuin Shiki' is the actual spiral seal placed on Naruto's stomach while the 'Shishou Fuin' is the strange Sanskrit like words on the top and bottom of the spiral. Shi the number 4; Shou elephant or image; Fuin seals; Hakke divination; Shiki method or way. Information on their names and translations come from NarutoEx.

(3) Um... I made up that rule. Example, Orochimaru implanted the curse seal by biting Sasuke and mixing the boy's blood with his own saliva and venom; afterwards, Kakashi had to use a blood seal to seal the curse and help Sasuke learn how to control it. If any of you have noticed, most other seals were created by ink on paper, not blood.

(4) General info: A lot of Kuunoki Shinobis are STILL scientists. They spend most of their time trying to manipulate their own bodies from the basic molecular level – sort of like Medic Nins. Uzumakis are specialists when it comes to manipulating their own blood, while the Dokudes can manipulate any solid or liquid material that comes into contact with their body. Inspired by watching way to much Full Metal Alchemist !

(5) You all know how Orochimaru did the summoning technique – Edo Tensei and summoned forth the first, second and almost completed the forth Hokage. Well, this is the same, except, instead of coffins coming up, it's a big fat scroll. The scroll itself is very similar to the Summoning contract that Jiraiya usually carries around his back, and signing the Uzumaki contract is the same as a summoning contract – you write your name in blood and then press your bloodied finger tips on there as a signature.

(6) Exactly like those dots on the forehead of monks either in India or China. The character 'Sanzo' from Saiyuki also has one of his forehead.

(7) Okay. I'm only going to say this once and for all: ALL OF THESE INTRICATE CIRCLE SEALS AND THEIR ACTIVATION PROCEDURE ARE INSPIRED BY FULL METAL ALCHEMIST –

exactly like how Edward Elric always slams his open palms down onto the ground.

(8) Basically, I took the picture of when Naruto first released the Kyuubi against Haku in the original manga (Book 4, chapter 28, page 3), and substituting it - sand instead of red Chakra, Shukaku's head instead of Kyuubi's head and Gaara's unconscious form instead of Naruto's standing one. Get the picture? XD

Yeah! Another successful chapter completed. The next chapter will be the last one for the first Arc in Faith. After that, please look for my continuation of this series; it'll be called ' Restoration of Faith' .

Once again, read and review. I do read all the reviews and reply to as many as I can.

As for those of you who are considered flammers, please don't bother flaming me. If you don't like it, just don't read it. I don't know why you even bother complaining to me, unless you want to write this story out yourself.

Chapter 20

Title: Faith Arc - Faith in Humanity (PG-13)

Author: Karrafear

Summary: AU. What if Naruto survived a murder attempt on his life at the age of 6 and had to leave Konoha for his protection. Now 12, Naruto and Jiraiya returns to face the Genin test. Chapter Twenty: Finding faith

Replies to my wonderful reviewers:

A Fan, Crystal-Chan2, lil Uchiha bunny, inu-chan 613, Sierra-Falls, Malachi, Gopu, Monaki-Cheung, drunkdragon12888, anonymous, aznboiblk, Chief316, blazer-6, SilverNightsFreedom, RuByMoOn17, bakashinji01, joelkool, Hitomi No Ryu, Zornoid13, nonengel, Dargon Sheinto, hikariko, Toki Mirage, I-laze, Winged Knight, One Azn Dragon, element4life, Dragon Man 180, Night-Owl123, Stoictimer, Wormkaizer, Crutches,

Xero-ghost: There is a difference between Naruto's seal and Gaara's seal. Naruto's seal was originally made to let Naruto merge with the Kyuubi, therefore destroying its soul in the process. However, in Gaara's case, Shukaku's power is literary stolen away from it and given to Gaara. So the purposes of these two seals are different but at the same time, it is difficult to say which one is stronger because Gaara's seal cannot be used on an S-Class demon, only on A-class or B-class demons. So, in essence, Naruto's Shikifuiin seal is probably stronger.

Daniel of Lorien: I don't know whether that's a complement or a criticism. V-V But I'll take it as an informative review, thanks.

Insanityv2: Yes, Orochimaru does have an Air Nin on his side but you guys might not be able to guess who he is. Yeah, I guessed added the 'no' in between 'Kuuki' because I didn't want to emphasize the idea of 'Air' itself, but more about 'Space'. If I called it 'Kuunoki', then it translate to something like 'Air IN Space' which is exactly what I was after in the first place. Hence, Kuunokigakure no Sato! Patience is a virtue, XD, you will all get a glimpse of the Dokudes clan in the up-coming Arc (3 of my OCs are Dokudes) so it'll be very interesting when I start introducing the different Clans of the Air village. Don't worry about the Jutsus, I've got plenty now thanks to you and Loon Luu. XD Arigato for all your help!

Warning: Naruto OOC. PG-13. This will be the last chapter of 'Faith in Humanity.' Please look out for 'Restoration of Faith' next time, which is the title of the second arc. It's a very light summary for this part of the series, there is NO action, I repeat NO action at all in this chapter, but I still hope you all read it and like it.

I apologise for the long wait. I would have updated a lot sooner but due to a certain incident, I was banned from my account by ffnet, that's why it's been such a long wait. Anyway, here it is - the last chapter of Faith in Humanity.

blab means "thoughts"

----- means "time passed" or "different place" or "different point of view"

Chapter 20

Two days had passed since the defeat of Gaara and the sealing of Shukaku. Naruto found himself wearing all black, and standing mournfully at the funeral ceremony of the third Hokage's passing. It was a memorial service that required all Konoha citizens to show their respect to the recently deceased men and women who had

died protecting Konoha. Luckily, there weren't that many, but still, even losing one was too much...

On the long table displayed in front of Naruto and his fellow Genins, stood the pictures of 7 proud Shinobis who had lost their lives defending the Leaf against the Sound and the Sand. Among them was the picture of the third Hokage himself, placed in the central podium surrounded by three pictures of each side. Every single citizen, civilian and Shinobi had placed flowers on the table in respect of the dead, symbolizing the united grief shared by everyone.

Naruto watched on with dazed sympathy as Konohamaru continued to cry on Iruka's shoulders, mourning his dead grandfather. He watched silently as all his new friends precluded him in placing their own flowers of respect atop the table.

It was like he was in a trance, he thought. Knowing what was happening and yet numb to all emotions outside of the emptiness that he now felt. He knew this was coming, he had prepared himself mentally and emotionally for the loss and yet, now he stood, completely stupefied once everything had proven as he predicted. He almost hoped that the predictions from his Aunt and his own visions were wrong, but they weren't. *What do you do if you knew you couldn't change the future? What do you do then?* He wondered to himself. *What's the point of being able to predict said future if you couldn't change it?* He could find no answer.

The Lady Oracle had left the very next day after the sealing of Shukaku – that was yesterday afternoon. She, Kaga-san and the three Sand siblings had made a quiet escape by teleporting to the outer regions of the Fire Country before leaving on their trek towards the Wind Country and the Sand village. Naruto was surprised that she was going to continue on with her tour when she wasn't completely healed from her own blood loss yet. But he had realised early on that when his Aunt decided to do something, nothing and no one can stop her, and so, he didn't try to stop her.

Naruto was also marginally surprised that Konoha Shinobis hadn't pursued after them since they had been harbouring the three Sand Ninjas with them in the first place. Or had they not noticed that the three had been with his Aunt the whole time? Once again, Naruto's assumptions had been proven wrong, since he later found out that Kaga-san had left the Elder Councillors of the Leaf Village a scroll detailing what the Air Nins have planned on doing, and somehow convinced the old Councillors to let them get away with it. It was during the supposed 'errand' that Kaga had to undertake the day of the sealing, which he had had a private meeting with the councillors. The negotiations had eventually led to the quiet exit of these five Shinobis (his Aunt, Kaga and the Sand siblings) from the watchful eyes of the ANBU and Jounin of the Leaf.

After the ceremony, Naruto decided to take walk around Konoha, seeing the damage caused by the Sound and Sand for himself. He was quiet, contemplative, as he watched all the extra labourers do their best in patching up roofs, re-open shops, and restock food supplies. It was a surreal feeling. Only two days ago, he had gone to that shop to buy groceries, or the one next to it to have a look at the weapons on sale. And now, he had to consciously remind himself that there was a giant hole on one side of the building.

Naruto blinked out of his roaming thoughts while he walked quietly towards the forest, where he and his teammates had first trained against Kakashi. He looked over the Heroes Stone plate and read over the 8 new names having been added onto the stone since the last time he had visited it. It was with a slight surprise as he read over the first of the 8 names – Gekkou Hayate. *He must have been caught in between the fighting...* Naruto mused to himself as he gazed sadly at the name of the Preliminary Chuunin Selection Exam referee. *I guess that's why they call this the 'Fallen Heroes'* Naruto thought as he recalled some of the villagers nickname for the Stone tablet.

Once again shaking away his depressing thoughts, Naruto continued on his aimless journey back towards the village centre, knowing that

there really wasn't any place he needed to be at the moment, or anyone that he really wanted to meet.

'Yo. Naruto.' The sudden interruption brought Naruto back from his musings abruptly. He looked upwards to see the usually masked face of Hatake Kakashi waving at him stupidly.

Naruto frowned. "What is it, Kakashi-sensei?" He asked, slightly irritated at having been brought back to reality so unexpectedly.

Kakashi gave a small nervous laugh as he scratched the back of his head. "Ah... It seems the Councillors want to see you. For what reason I have no idea..." Kakashi explained in a non-threatening manner, as if it was an everyday occurrence that the ruling council of Konoha wants to speak to a lowly Genin.

Naruto's frown deepened in suspicions but he firmly shook it away after a few seconds of thoughts. *They probably have some questions about Aunt Ruri* . Naruto thought to himself resolutely before he gave Kakashi a final nod of acknowledgement and then turning around to walk towards the Hokage tower, where he knew the Councillors were waiting.

Watching his student walk straight towards his new destination, Kakashi shrugged to himself, knowing that Naruto could take care of himself no matter what he is faced with. He stood a little longer watching the blonde haired boy disappear into the distance, musing about how far Naruto had come, how far all of his students have come. *Strength wise, Naruto could very soon rival me, I think. But for now, with the Sharingan, I still have the upper hand.* Kakashi silently compared the strength and skill level between himself and his young student. However, the whole implication of Naruto surpassing him anytime soon is already a very surprising factor; after all, Kakashi was world renowned as a Genius. *He really is **his** son!*

Turning around, Kakashi continued on his own path towards the old Uchiha residence, where he knew a certain black haired boy would

be located. *Naruto has done his part, now it's my turn with Sasuke. Even Sakura is growing up just fine.* Kakashi continued to muse. Looking up at the cloudless blue sky, Kakashi gave a small, happy sigh. *They have all grown so much. They are the future of Konoha. They are the hope... and the spirit of fire that will forever burn... like the memories of the great heroes before them... Hokage-sama. The future is starting to look brighter, ne?* He asked the sky.

Upon entering the old office of the third Hokage, now converted into a war room for the ruling councillors, the Country's officials as well as other powerful clansman; Naruto found himself to be ushered in and pushed towards a seat in between two of his own fellow Genins – Sakura and Shikamaru. Looking around the room, Naruto noted to himself some familiar faces but most were unknown to him. There was (surprisingly) Jiraiya (standing in the far left corner), some Jounins and Anbu personnel (he recognised Ibiki, Anko and Genma from the Chuunin Selection Exams); there were a few Hyuuga representatives, as well as other powerful Clans (Aburame, Inuzuka, Yamanaka, Akimichi and Nara) present.

Seeing that Naruto had finally arrived, without further ado, Hyuuga Hiashi, the head of the Hyuuga Clan called forth the meeting to begin.

Naruto frowned once again as he watched the proceeding discussions over what Konoha would do during the aftermath of the Sound invasion. He was still confused as to why he's even in this meeting in the first place. Looking over towards his fellow Genins seem to indicate their own confusion as to their own reasons for being in the meeting as well. Sakura had the same confused expression on her face and she could only shrug in response to his silent question. Shikamaru didn't even lift his head off the table to look at the discussions being held; he simply had no interest in what the hell the old geezers were talking about.

One of the elder Committee advisors, Homura, concluded the results of the Sound Invasion in a brief outline. "The Sand has declared a complete surrender to the Leaf. It seems that Orochimaru had double-crossed them as well as us. Their Kazekage was found yesterday, his dead body and two other corpses were identified to have died several days before the Chuunin Exam. So far, the Wind Country's monarchy as well as his governmental departments have proclaimed Orochimaru to be the ultimate mastermind and argued for their own Shinobi's innocence in the matter. However, within the Sand village itself, there is still a large amount of mutiny and chaos within their streets. They were close to being overthrown by civil war itself; therefore I am unsure of how much we can trust their words. After all, once bitten, twice shy." Finished with his explanations, Homura sat down in his own seat at the forefront of the long table.

Koharu, the only female elder Committee advisor took her place at the head of the table to continue with the discussions at hand.

"Currently, both the Sand and the Leaf are in a very deep predicament. We have both suffered losses in Shinobi numbers, of course, Leaf having sustained much less than the Sand. But still, without an official Kage to lead us, we will be viewed as vulnerable and weak in our current state, and this may lead to further conflict with other countries. Not to mention... even our own people, the villagers, are getting fearful of this supposed imminent war. Therefore, I propose that we, the newly appointed emergency executive committee, to step up a stronger security and defence line, push for further development and prove to our customers that we are still strong."

Pausing for a bit as most of the people within the room nodded to her wise advice, Koharu continued with the rest of her suggestions. "But our top priority right now is to appoint a Godaime Hokage (5th Hokage), to lead Konoha into the new age!" Instantly after that announcement, there were murmurs of opinions and ideas from all over the room. After all, it wasn't everyday that committee had the power to pick the next Hokage, most of the time, it had been the

previous Hokage himself that had the privilege of picking his successor.

After a few long minutes of continued chitchat slowly rising into full out verbal arguments, the two elder Committee advisors had had enough. Slamming his fist down onto the table to silence everyone in the room, Homura stood up proudly in his old age and shouted to be heard. "Enough! I will not tolerate such undisciplined behaviour within this very room, in front of the four faces of the great Hokages!" Immediately, the room was silenced, none willing to bear the brunt of Homura's anger. Seeing that he had everyone's attentions, Homura continued. "Both Koharu and I have discussed this matter firmly beforehand, and we have come to the conclusion that Jiraiya should be the next Godaime Hokage."

Jiraiya immediately snapped to attention and glared at his two elders. Opening his mouth, ready to retort, Jiraiya was abruptly cut off. "HOWEVER!" Homura interrupted, silencing Jiraiya as well as any other person who was ready to argue the point. "After a short counsel session with the Lady Oracle of the Kuunoki, we have deduced that perhaps Jiraiya is not of the best character quality to lead an entire village such as ours." In the background, Jiraiya flinched, and Naruto smirked in amusement. "Therefore, we have come to the conclusion that the last of the three Legendary Sannin would be the best choice to become the next Hokage. Are there any arguments against this suggestion?" Homura asked in a threatening manner, as if daring anyone to argue with him.

A few minutes to soft discussion among themselves, Hyuuga Hiashi of the Hyuuga Clan stood up from his seat. "I, Hyuuga Hiashi, clan head of the Hyuuga, accept this proposal for having the Legendary Tsunade-hime to become the Godaime Hokage." As if the floodgates had suddenly opened, more and more clan heads soon stood up from their own seats to declare that they too, would accept this act. Eventually, everyone had agreed on this course of action.

Homura nodded in recognition, glad that everyone was actually agreeing on something. Waiting for the silence to return to the room,

he finally started to detail the rest of the plan. "Even though we have all decided that Tsunade-hime is the best choice, we still do not know of her whereabouts. Therefore, Koharu and myself would like to volunteer Jiraiya to be part of the expedition to bring Tsunade-hime back to Konoha, are there any disagreements?" Most heads in the room nodded in acceptance, none shook in disagreement.

Behind them, Jiraiya slumped his shoulders in irritation and disagreement. *Damn! There goes my time of research* . He mentally cried to himself. His attention was brought back however when one of the Jounins suggested that he too, would volunteer to go on this expedition and accompany Jiraiya. "NO!" Jiraiya shouted to be heard, interrupting everyone's thoughts. "I'll bring her back to become the next Hokage no matter what. You don't need to send spies to accompany me." He replied snidely, completely seeing through the disguise of the suggestion, knowing that most of the Jounins in this room didn't trust him to not disappear on them.

Hyuuga Hiashi, once again the voice of reason, tried to intervene. "Perhaps just one or two Anbu would be suitable to help you as part of the search party..."

"No way. No how." Jiraiya replied succinctly. The rest of the room's participants looked at each other for any further suggestions. Jiraiya's eyebrow twitched in irritation as the murmurs slowly rose in height. "FINE!" He screamed. "But only ONE Shinobi is to accompany me, and I get to choose who." He detailed the conditions. Koharu and Homura nodded in acquiescence, already knowing whom he was going to choose.

Hiashi once again took up the centre stage as he addressed the Sannin face to face: "And who would that be, Jiraiya-sama?"

Jiraiya smirked. "Naruto. He would be the only one to accompany me on this journey." Tilting his head slightly, Jiraiya looked straight at Naruto's blank face. "What do you say, kiddo?" He asked. With the whole room's attention completely focused on him, Naruto could only shrug in response but acquiesced by nodding his head in the end.

With that part of the meeting over and done with, Koharu smiled warmly around the room, though her old and wrinkled face. Seeing that everyone had agreed (though some were more reluctant than others), she too, stood from her own seat to reinstate the rest of the meeting priorities. "Now that everyone is in accordance, let us continue with the rest of the meeting. The next step in the plan would be to appoint a temporary head of Konoha, to handle all incoming and outgoing Ninja activity, as well as other internal and external issues. I suggest that Hyuuga Hiashi-sama should take over this role, at least until the return of Tsunade. Does everyone agree?" She asked and most of the room's members had stood in accordance to agree, with the exception being Hyuuga Hiashi himself.

"Koharu-sama. Are you sure such great responsibility should rest on my hands alone? Please don't mistake me, it would be a great honour to take up this role, but are you truly confident in my ability to not lead Konoha into war?" Hiashi asked in a serious manner.

It was surprising for Naruto to watch one of the most powerful and possibly the most arrogant man in the entire Leaf village ask one of the elders if he was truly worthy of the position. From what he had heard about the Hyuuga Clan leader from his Aunt and Kaga-san, as well as how shy and unsure Hinata acts; Naruto was almost sure that he would really come to hate the man. And yet, here he was, questioning his own worth in front of an emergency council.

Homura and Koharu took some time to convince Hiashi that he truly was the only man possibly capable of pulling this off. "After all, even the Lady Oracle advises that you take up the position, therefore you should feel confident in your own abilities." Koharu's answer shocked both Hiashi and Naruto (who was able to hear them from the other side of the room due to his currently Chakra enhanced hearing). It was a well-known fact that all Kuunoki villagers despised the Hyuugas, especially the Hyuuga head family. After the certain incident that occurred almost 17 years ago, most Air Nins refused to

come to Konoha due to the power held by the Hyuuga's in this village. (1)

Eventually, Hiashi surrendered his own arguments and took up the position of temporary head or leader for Konoha. "For my first task as acting Hokage of the Hidden Leaf Village, I formally welcome three new Chuunin recruits into official services under the Konoha banner." Hiashi announced suddenly, which brought to attention the three former-Genins.

Every one in the room had swivelled around in their seats to look upon the three Genins in welcome (some more than others). "Haruno Sakura, Uzumaki Naruto, Nara Shikamaru. I present to you your new Chuunin vests that will officially proclaim you as new Chuunins to the Leaf village. Do you accept your new rank?" Hiashi asked in a firm tone of voice.

All three Genins were still relatively shocked at the announcement that they had attained Chuunin level, though Shikamaru less than others. He had suspected it was something like that, but considering he had forfeited his own fight, he didn't think that he would have received the rank in the first place. Thought slightly suspicious and reluctant, Shikamaru was the first to come forward and accept his Chuunin vest as his father pushed him from behind. Shikamaru could only give Hiashi a wry smile as he nodded in respect and received the green vest, before putting it on proudly.

Sakura was next in line to come forth and accept her own vest. She hadn't truly believed that she had gotten the Chuunin rank, after all, she still thought of herself as rather weak and misguided. *I'm a Chuunin! I'm a CHUUNIN!!!* Inner Sakura cheered as she jumped around in joy. *YEAH! TAKE THAT! I'M A CHUUNIN!!!!* The mental image of herself continued to prance around while outer Sakura stood unsteadily in front of Hiashi, giving him a beaming smile and accepted her own green vest. *Who would have thought?! I'm weaker than Sasuke and yet I received the Chuunin Rank before him! I wonder why that is...* Musing to herself, she silently wore the green vest over her normal red dress. Looking over her clashing coloured

clothes, she mentally winched. *Damn! I'll definitely have to change my clothes. It's about time to, anyway, I was getting tired of wearing the same style all the time.* Sakura thought to herself happily, firmly giving herself an excuse to go shopping later as well as a reason to celebrate and gloat in front of Ino, her eternal rival.

Surprisingly, Naruto was the last to step forward to receive his own Chuunin vest. With everything that had been going on inside his head, having found out that there were certain future events he couldn't change, the discovery of Shukaku and his imminent sealing, Naruto had completely forgotten why he even entered the Chuunin Exams in the first place. His focus had completely shifted from surviving his Aunt's torturous training, to Orochimaru's planned invasion, to Shukaku and Gaara, and back and forth between other more important issues. Naruto was completely shocked that he had already overcome his first obstacle in achieving his original dream of becoming a Hokage. He had completely misplaced his dream when his Aunt had suddenly reappeared and demanded most, if not all of his attention. *Is that what I'm becoming? My life revolves around hers and others, but not myself... That isn't right.*

Hearing Hiashi cough discretely, Naruto shook away all his musings to finally reach his hands out, ready to receive the vest. The green clothed vest was lighter than he had expected, but then again, it was empty of scrolls and weapons. Naruto touched the fabric almost regally. *Is this what father would have gone through when he first passed the Chuunin Exam?* Naruto asked himself. He could just imagine to himself what it would have been like for his own father, the now renowned fourth Hokage of Konoha, to accept the vest that proved he had grown strong, strong enough to be placed with the responsibilities of Chuunin. Naruto hugged the vest close to his chest, close to his heart, ignoring the curious gazes he was gaining by NOT wearing the vest immediately.

After everything was settled with the newly appointed Chuunins - as in they have their new contracts signed, their pictures taken, et cetera - it was time for the three newly proclaimed Chuunins to leave

the room and any subsequent discussions for the higher ups to argue over without their presence being necessary. Outside of the Hokage building, Shikamaru and Sakura waved to Naruto as they each had their own destination in mind – Shikamaru to his favourite spot for Cloud gazing, Sakura to the newly reconstructed mall to find a complementary dress to her new Chuunin vest. Naruto had nowhere to go and his mind was still too filled with chaotic thoughts for him to come up with any coherent conclusion.

Deciding that he would just let his feet take him to where ever they wish to go, Naruto stumbled upon Iruka-sensei – the man who had saved his life in the first place almost 6 years prior. Discovering that Naruto had attained the Chuunin Rank, Iruka enthusiastically invited Naruto to free Ramen at Konoha's most famous Raman bar – the Ichiraku. Of course, Naruto agreed.

Over 20 odd bowls of Ramen later and a very broke Iruka, Naruto finally decided to go home. Dragging himself to his apartment, Naruto was surprised that there was a small party awaiting him in his living room. Haku had made a small ice cream cake for the celebration, since he had heard from Jiraiya beforehand of the Council's decisions on promoting Naruto. Most other Shinobis and civilians alike had no clue that the three Genins had just been promoted, but then again, their official rank wasn't completed yet as they needed the Godaime Hokage's emblem to finalise everything; so most probably, Kakashi still hadn't heard of the news yet. Partying until quiet late at night, both Haku and Naruto decided to finally go to sleep, since Naruto had an important mission starting tomorrow.

Lying atop his comfortable bed, Naruto gazed at the full moon outside his window. There, he laid and there, he thought. *I've come full circle, haven't I?* Naruto thought to himself.

He remembered the night that Mrs Tanuki had first tried to suffocate him but was thwarted by Iruka's timely presence. He remembered the subsequent discussion they had had between himself, the young Iruka, the third Hokage and the newly introduced Jiraiya. He

remembered all those years spent travelling with Jiraiya, going from village to village. Though he had always been curious and often asked Jiraiya about the world, Naruto knew he was exceptionally cautious about who could get close to himself. *Never form any ties. Never let yourself be hurt. Never take the risk to open up your heart... God! I was an idiot!* Naruto mentally scolded himself.

He remembered when he first met Elle and how she had somehow coaxed him into learning how to live again in the outside world without fear. *But the time spent with her was so short...* Naruto mentally commented. *Sometimes I wonder, would her death be one of those unchangeable futures, like the third Hokage's death? If it is so, then... could I still blame myself for not doing enough? Would it still be my fault?* After taking some time to think about it, Naruto's head started to hurt. *Why the hell was I feeling so guilty anyway? At the time, I was in pain, I was hurt, confused and angry... but that doesn't necessary mean it was my fault... and yet, at the same time, I still have any right to go on a rampage the way I did... It wasn't Kyuubi's fault... It was mine...*

Naruto finally forced himself to relive the nightmare of the night. He remembered what it felt like to push his clawed hand into someone's chest, breaking through the ribs as he went along and pulling out the living organ – the heart – still pumping furious for blood. He remembered how he had laughed, almost insanely; at the petrified stares the men were giving him as well as the screams for mercy that surrounds him. Most of all, remembered the stench of blood that covered his entire body as well as all the rooms. He remembered he liked the taste of blood, the feel of blood, the fissure of victory and triumph that thrummed through his veins... and he felt disgusted with himself. *It wasn't Kyuubi at all... It was me... I wanted revenge... I had wanted to rip them all bit by bit... just to satisfy my own hunger for vengeance and blood... And I did.* Naruto thought to himself sardonically.

There was no point in continuing to blame himself. There was no point in continuing to hide from the truth, the truth that it had been

'himself' that was enjoying the killing just as much as the fox within that was encouraging him. Naruto was tired of always running from his past. This time, he would accept it... all the good times and the bad. That's what survival's all about... and he knew... he was a survivor.

I was so stupid after Elle's death. Heh. I even thought I could kill myself. For a long time afterwards, Naruto had truly thought that he couldn't be killed. He had tried to poison himself, starve himself, and slit a kunai across his wrist and throat – all to no avail. Either it was Jiraiya that interrupted him or he was eventually saved by the demon fox's power of healing inside of him.

But once again, Naruto realised he was wrong. *Somewhere deep inside my heart... I must have NOT wanted to die at all. I must have been desperate to live... It was all me...* Once more, while Naruto ran away from reality, his inner heart fought tooth and nail to keep his life in tact. Naruto now recognised the signs, the signs of his own heart, his own mind fighting the very depression that had made him welcome death with open arms and yet fought against with every fibre of his being.

I wanted to live... I know that now... I had always wanted to live... And Aunt Ruri showed me how... Naruto smiled ironically at his memories. He remembered his first meeting with his Aunt, the very first impression he had of her was that he needed to obey her. She was a woman that should be respected and complied with all her wishes. She had been firm, stern, and even downright sadistic at times, and yet, whenever the going gets tough, she always showed her more gentle side towards him – caring for him when he was sick or injured, telling him stories of his mother and father. There was a strange connection between them that bound them together stronger than glue. It was a bond of blood, of family, of destiny.

He had never regretted meeting his Aunt, though he did hate his lineage and the rules that must be applied to said lineage. However, when it all comes down to it, he would have done everything the same if only to get to know her for a little while, if only to learn from

her a little more. She was family - that had never been in denial... but this place... Konoha... was home.

Konoha. The Hidden Leaf Village. This was the place where his father was born, grew up in, and died for. This was the place that his mother visited, fell in love with his father, fell in love with the place itself, and also died for. Naruto had often wondered what was so great about Konoha that both his parents would sacrifice their lives for. After all, wasn't family a lot more important than just a piece of land? But now he realised. He had finally come to an understanding after witnessing the third Hokage's funeral processions.

It wasn't just a piece of land, it was their home, the place they felt they belonged, a place where they feel they're welcomed and would happily spend the rest of their lives within, even if they were locked inside the gates for all eternity. That was the difference between Konoha and Kuunoki – the choice. The People living in the Hidden Air village have no choice; they could not leave the village unless they were given permission to. And most importantly, they hated the walls that entrap them into this singular place for all time. On the other hand, Konoha residents welcomed the wall as a sign of security and unity. It was a bizarre idea but none the less an important one.

"I've found my home, Aunt Ruri..." Naruto whispered as he slowly drifted off to sleep. *I've found my family and my home. And even though they're in different parts of the world, I'll find a way to unite them. I have faith in myself and faith in humanity...*

(1) Once again, the 'incident' will be discussed later in the series, so please be patient.

So, how do you like it... I know it's the shortest chapter but I really couldn't drag it any longer without making it too repetitive.

Well. All reviews are welcomed. I really want to know what all of you think.

The next arc – Restoration of Faith – is actually the most exciting part of the series, with tonnes of fights and plenty of OCs coming into it.

IMPORTANT: All the pictures for the new OCs that will be coming out is also on my website, in the Galleries page (It has also been updated with other pics) – go to my profile's page to find the link. Please enjoy!

Thanks again everyone for supporting me for such a long time. I will – hopefully - be seeing all of you SOON!

Author's note

Hi all

I'm still getting reviews/messages/emails asking me when I'm going to continue Faith in Humanity .

I'd like to get this straight once and for all.

Faith in Humanity **ALREADY** has a **SEQUEL** – which is called Restoration of Faith .

Faith in Humanity is **FINISHED! Go to the SEQUEL!**

Hello people, I'm already half way through Restoration of Faith!

And after Restoration of Faith , there should be one last arc, called Trials of Faith .

You can find the sequel using 'Search' on ffnet or through my profile's page.

Let this be a lesson to you all!